

Ethiopia: Governing the Faithful

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I. Overview

Ethiopia provides a significant example of the struggle governments are undertaking to find and implement effective policy responses to faith-based violent extremism and sectarian conflict. Given both demographic shifts and greater religious freedoms, the management of religious conflict and practice has of necessity been a complex and sometimes fraught task. A changed context has seen the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) government shift from mediating conflict between faith groups to regulating religious practice, especially where there are political or extremist overtones. Local actors have used the state's interventionist inclinations in the confessional realm to gain advantage in wider leadership struggles within Ethiopia's ethnically based regional states. Opposition groups, not always within formal parties, have also used religious issues to score political points. The Ethiopian experience shows not only how faith is an increasing political resource, especially at local levels, but also lessons that can be learned from top-down interventions in the religious sphere.

Although often regarded as a predominantly Christian country, the confessional landscape is diverse and evolving, and religion is increasingly politicised by a range of domestic actors, including the state. Faith runs deep, and its religions (particularly the Orthodox Church) have at various times in history been intimately connected to the Ethiopian state and its administration. Always a significant but institutionally disadvantaged minority, the Muslim population has grown in relative terms in recent decades and is at least as numerous as that in Sudan, Ethiopia's predominantly Islamic neighbour. Previously discriminated against (including by the state), Muslims and Protestants have embraced and capitalised on the lifting of religious restrictions by the 1994 secular constitution.

Faith-based communal conflicts have, in modern times at least, been rare though deadly, bringing prompt community and government responses. Sporadic confessional violence over the last decades has not translated into a real threat to a long tradition of religious (though often unequal) co-existence. While inter-confessional tensions remain, they appear to have been largely superseded in recent years by tensions between the government and faith communities. Ethiopian Orthodox Christians and Muslims alike have accused the former of undue interference in their internal religious affairs, whereas the government sees itself as holding the secular line against politicisation and extremism.

Ethiopia, like its immediate neighbours, is faced with difficult policy choices involved in guarding against internal radicalisation through systematic (at times constitutionally questionable) interventions that have tended to favour established religious authorities. The government, and donors keen to support global efforts against violent extremism, should always consider first, the risk of such interventions to the state's neutrality as mediator, and secondly, that taking sides in intra-religious debates could exacerbate communal faith-based conflicts. Above all, those backing interventions should always seek better understanding of what faith means to multi-ethnic, religiously diverse societies like (but not limited to) Ethiopia, in which the distinction between group and individual identity is often not well defined, and rival local actors are apt to make use of religious disputes where social and governmental constraints inhibit open political competition.

II. Faith in Modern Ethiopia

Despite a long history of religious diversity, Ethiopia has traditionally and officially been associated with the Ethiopian Orthodox (Tewahedo) Church (EOTC).¹ Notwithstanding the state's avowedly secular nature since the 1974 revolution, many external observers still view the country as a stable Christian island between Muslim-dominated Sudan (and Egypt) to its west, Somalia to its east and the Arabian Peninsula to the north.²

The religious landscape has changed significantly in the last half century. The Derg military regime that overthrew Emperor Haile Selassie I in 1974 swiftly instituted a secular order that officially ended nearly two millennia of political intimacy between the state and the EOTC, which lost its economic privileges and much of its property. In turn, religious minorities, including Muslims, benefited from the regime's inclusive reforms. The opening did not last long. In May 1975, the regime shifted to a more aggressive denunciation of religious belief, abolished the monarchy and proclaimed a Marxist-Leninist state. It cast religion as a reactionary force, suppressed public manifestations of belief and subjected all religious groups to varying degrees of state-led persecution. Protestants in particular were targeted for alleged links to "Western imperialism".³

The Derg's transition from military to civilian regime in 1987 failed to stave off its demise, and in 1991 it was overthrown by an ethnic-nationalist-based coalition of armed opposition movements, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which still rules the country.⁴ The EPRDF embraced religious, ethnic and regional pluralism. The 1994 federal constitution confirmed a firmly secular state – with absolute separation between religion and state and prohibition of a state

¹ This briefing uses the U.S. Board on Geographic Names and the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names for British Official Use transliteration system for Ethiopian script.

² An especially insightful collection regarding the Muslim perspective on the role of religion in contemporary Ethiopia is Patrick Desplat and Terje Østebø (eds.), *Muslims in Ethiopia: The Christian Legacy, Identity Politics and Islamic Reformism* (New York, 2013).

³ Jörg Hausteiner and Terje Østebø, "EPRDF's revolutionary democracy and religious plurality: Islam and Christianity in post-Derg Ethiopia", *Journal of East African Studies*, vol. 5, no. 4 (2011), pp. 756-760.

⁴ Other non-EPRDF forces, especially the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), which sought Eritrea's independence from Ethiopia, also fought the Derg.

religion – and enshrined religious freedoms and equality, a significant step toward redressing religious minorities’ grievances.⁵

The new freedoms were especially relevant to Muslims: restrictions on pilgrimage to Mecca were lifted, major Islamic festivals declared public holidays, public office hours adapted to prayer times, regulations for the construction of mosques and schools/madrasas eased and Sharia (Islamic law) courts’ legal status clarified.⁶ The Muslim community enjoys historically unprecedented levels of political and economic engagement in the state and public life, as do the growing number of Protestants.

The recognition and extension of rights to previously discriminated and under-represented groups has been a critical part of the ruling coalition’s policy of redressing ills of the imperial and Derg regimes. Nevertheless, from the early 1990s, the threat of radical Islamist groups emanating from Sudan and Somalia was of increasing concern, which led to a greater state interest in regulating religious activities, despite the secular constitution.⁷ Government concerns over religious practice and activism increased even more after opposition parties disputed the 2005 election results, leading to clashes and widespread arrests.⁸ Consequently, space for formal political opposition, as well as the autonomy of civil society broadly defined, including religious groups, that the government believed was politicised narrowed considerably.⁹

III. Communal Tensions

EPRDF rule and the 1994 constitution encouraged a flourishing of faith-based life, but the easing of religious freedoms brought its own challenges, not least instances of intolerance, particularly where Christian and Muslim communities live in close proximity. Recent official census figures show a much larger Muslim population, demographically underlining a relative equality of numbers as well as status in the post-1991 ethnically and culturally plural country.¹⁰ Many episodes of faith-based tensions initially played out at regional and local levels, intertwining with ethnicity and especially localised legacies and grievances.¹¹

⁵ John Abbink, “Religious freedom and the political order: the Ethiopian ‘secular state’ and the containment of Muslim identity politics”, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, vol. 8, no. 4 (2014), pp. 346-365.

⁶ Hausteim and Østebø, op. cit., p. 757.

⁷ The 1995 assassination attempt on Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in Addis Ababa, attributed to the Egyptian Islamist extremists Jama’a al-Islamiyya, with connections to the Sudanese National Islamic Front government, and bomb attacks and assassination and insurgent activity by the Somali Salafi jihadi group Al-Itihad Al-Islamiyya caused particular worry. The best regional account of this period is Alex de Waal, “The Politics of Destabilisation in the Horn, 1989-2001”, in Alex de Waal (ed.), *Islamism and its Enemies in the Horn of Africa* (London, 2003), pp. 182-230.

⁸ John Abbink, “Discomfiture of Democracy? The 2005 Election Crisis in Ethiopia and its Aftermath”, *African Affairs*, vol. 105, no. 419 (2006), pp. 173-199.

⁹ Crisis Group does not have permission to do field research in Ethiopia. Where Crisis Group staff have met with officials and international observers in Addis Ababa, interviews are noted as “Crisis Group interviews”; other interviews cited draw on a range of other sources shared with it.

¹⁰ The 2007 census found Ethiopia had c. 73.8 million inhabitants, 43 per cent identified as Christian Orthodox, 34 per cent as Muslim and 18 per cent as Protestant. “The 2007 Census Report”, Central Statistical Agency, Addis Ababa (2009).

¹¹ Hussein Ahmed, “Coexistence and/or confrontation?: Towards a reappraisal of Christian-Muslim encounter in Contemporary Ethiopia”, *Journal of Religion in Africa*, vol. 36, no. 1 (2006), pp. 4-22.

A. *Faith-based Contests and Conflicts in the Public Space*

The first post-1991 religious divisions focused on where people could worship. This was demonstrated most clearly in the controversy surrounding a 2003 attempt to build a mosque in Axum, the northern city viewed by the EOTC as its most sacred site.¹² A mob tore down the unfinished building, and the regional government subsequently denied a request for land to build another mosque.¹³ This assertion of exclusive ownership over certain sacred sites also occurred in areas of particular significance for Ethiopian Muslims, especially, in 2001, in the eastern city of Harar – locally considered the “fourth holiest city of Islam” – where authorities opposed attempts to build new churches and evicted or demolished some existing churches.¹⁴ The contest over the sacred space also extended to burial sites throughout the country in the early 2000s.¹⁵

Christian-Muslim conflicts were often rooted in local administrative decisions over land use in the 1990s, but, in the past decade, they have increasingly been over deeper political and ideological factors connected to ethnic rivalries and inequalities or driven by fundamentalist doctrine. Much of the most notable violence was in Oromia, the largest and most populous state. In September 2006, several were killed and hundreds displaced by Christian-Muslim clashes, often reflecting ethnic divides, in western Oromia’s Jimma and Illubabor zones. A video of the gruesome aftermath of the killing of several worshippers was widely circulated at churches and posted on Ethiopian websites. There was a mass attack on 25 Protestant families from Seka Chekorsa in Jimma in 2007 and arson and looting of Protestant-owned houses in the same town that April. Clashes were reportedly sparked by Muslim complaints that the smoke from an Ethiopian Orthodox Church celebration had permeated a nearby mosque; some observers say the smoke was a deliberate provocation by hardline Orthodox Christians.¹⁶

In early 2011, the burning of Protestant churches (some suggest as many as 50)¹⁷ reportedly killed two Christians and displaced some 4,000 from the small towns of Asendabo, Omo Nada, Agaro and Yebu in Jimma; some said the attacks were sparked by rumours a Christian had desecrated a Quran, but local church leaders attributed them to the growth of Islamic fundamentalism in the region.¹⁸

¹² Axum is the site of the Church of Our Lady of Zion, which the EOTC considers home to the original Ark of the Covenant (Tabot). The EOTC has also sought to block any attempts to build a mosque in Lalibela town, famous for its medieval rock-hewn churches.

¹³ Since the Derg’s nationalisation, all land is state-owned, held by citizens or institutions on a lease arrangement that gives a variety of rights but not of sale or mortgage. To build churches, mosques and other religious structures, communities must lease land from the government; leases must be renewed periodically with the local authorities; local politicians and officials can stymie approvals and occasionally order religious buildings’ destruction by denying renewal.

¹⁴ There were similar instances in 2009, when conflicting Orthodox and Muslim claims over sites in Gonder town led to economic embargoes between the communities that eventually culminated in violent clashes. That same year, Muslims and Christians clashed over the construction of a church in Dessie, in north-central Ethiopia.

¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, Addis Ababa, 20 April 2014.

¹⁶ Zelalem Tadesse, “The 2006 religious conflict in Didessa and Goma Woradas of Western Oromia”, MA thesis, Institute of Ethiopia Studies, Addis Ababa University (2009); Crisis Group email correspondence, academic expert, 3 February 2016.

¹⁷ “Panel Discussion on causes of religious-based conflicts and potential solutions” (in Amharic), Voice of America (VOA) radio, 17 March 2011.

¹⁸ “We are threatened by these forces on a daily basis. It is a mixed group of local youth brainwashed by the Wahhabi ideologies and some newcomers who are coming to the different mosques here as

Partly in response and with encouragement from the regional and federal governments, communities and religious leaders established the Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia (IRCE) in January 2010 to swiftly address local and national-level inter-faith conflict and promote dialogue, religious tolerance and collaboration between religious communities. It has had successes, notably in 2011 when it was critical in resolving the growing number of faith-based conflicts. However, its efficacy – in particular perceptions of its neutrality – has on occasion reportedly suffered from too close an association with the government.¹⁹

B. *Drivers of Faith-based Conflicts*

Ethnic tensions, growing evangelism, the spread and use of print and electronic media, a significant and expanding youth population and the perceived deficits of Ethiopia's outwardly democratic system have both changed religious practice and altered its role in public life, especially its political aspects. The relationship between ethnicity and religion is particularly entwined; often ethnicity unites, faith divides, and vice versa.²⁰ For some communities, such as the Silte, ethnic and religious boundaries reinforce each other, mostly peacefully. For others, faith reinforces perceived ethnic inequalities closely linked with political and economic power carried over from the imperial era. For example, the mid-2000s violence in Jimma pitted Muslims, who tended to be ethnic Oromos, against Christians, who were predominantly Amhara settlers from Gojjam.²¹ The fallout from the contested 2005 election results may also have played a role in the increase in religious violence in Jimma, as well as the politicisation of religious discourse as space for formal opposition shrank.²²

In Kemisse – the administrative centre of an ethnic Oromo enclave in Amhara regional state in the north east – an apparent Muslim-Christian conflict could also be interpreted as an intra-Oromo elite competition over resources and leadership. There and elsewhere the perception exists that Christian Oromo from the west dominate the ruling Oromo Peoples' Democratic Organisation (OPDO) and the Oromia state administration, monopolising public sector employment.²³

darasas (students) and preachers”, interview, Protestant resident, Assendabo, Jimma zone, 2 April 2014.

¹⁹ The IRCE was particularly associated with the federal affairs ministry (for a time based in its offices); Crisis Group interview, national peace-building expert, Addis Ababa, November 2015.

²⁰ Tony Karbo, “Religion and social cohesion in Ethiopia”, *International Journal of Peace and Development Studies*, vol. 4, no. 3 (2013), pp. 43-52. Ethiopia's ethnic make-up is one of the most diverse on the continent; according to the 2007 census, the main “national ethnic” groups are Oromos (34 per cent), Amhara (27 per cent), Somali (6 per cent) and Tigrayans (6 per cent). The Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region contains many ethnic groups, including Gurage, from whom the Silte declared themselves distinct after 1991. “The 2007 Census Report”, op. cit.

²¹ The majority of Amhara are Christians; Oromos are almost evenly divided between Christians, (Orthodox, 30 per cent; Protestant, 18 per cent; and Catholics, 0.5 per cent) and Muslims (48 per cent); “The 2007 Census Report”, op. cit.

²² “The fact most of this violent conflict happened shortly after the national election was not mere coincidence. In our area the opposition party, specifically the Oromo National Congress and Kinjit [Coalition for Unity and Democracy] had strong public support. ... The religious-based unrests we saw in the area shortly after elections are mostly resulting from frustrations people had”. Interview, higher education worker, Jimma, 3 April 2014.

²³ In March 2006, dozens were injured when Orthodox and Protestant Churches were set alight, according to a local Muslim in response to the circulation of a Christian spiritual tract that depicted

Another development has been the increase in polemical exchanges between faiths. Both Christian and Muslim preachers have openly denounced other religious groups.²⁴ Citing freedom of expression, members of all faiths have published books, articles and audiovisual materials questioning the very legitimacy of other religions.²⁵ These have been widely circulated by all faith groups, including Orthodox and evangelical Protestant, as well as Islamic reform movements and have found a significant audience in Ethiopia's large youth population, which is better educated, more literate and often more prone to activism.²⁶

IV. Intra-faith Disputes

Tensions within the Muslim and Orthodox Christianity communities have also risen, at times pitting the older establishment against reformist, neo-conservative youth and educated elite movements.

A. Islam

Ethiopian Muslims follow different theological interpretations, though the Sufi orders were historically most influential.²⁷ Nevertheless, a number of Islamic reform movements in the country have gained ground in recent decades, including an "intellectualist" movement, the quietist missionary Ja'amat-al-Tabligh movement and Salafi (or more pejoratively termed "Wahhabi") groups.²⁸ The intellectualist movement takes its inspiration from the (international) Muslim Brotherhood, attracting significant numbers of young, educated urban Muslims. The quietist Ja'amat-al-Tabligh (Society for Spreading Faith) is also rapidly expanding and is particularly active among the Silte and Gurage people and in southern Oromia's Borena zone.²⁹ A wide spectrum of Salafi groups, many quietist like the Tablighis, are prevalent at national and regional levels and, though well financed and organised, are by no means unified;³⁰ the extrem-

the Prophet Mohammed. Interview, local resident, Kemisse, 4 March 2014. The Oromo, the largest ethnic minority in Amhara regional state, were granted a special zone in 1994.

²⁴ Jon Abbink, "Religion in Public Spaces: Emerging Muslim-Christian Polemics in Ethiopia", *African Affairs*, vol. 110, no. 439 (2011), pp. 253-274.

²⁵ The Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Muslims and the Pentecostal-Evangelical groups have produced print and multimedia publications. Many of the Muslim ones are translations from foreign authors, including Pakistani A. Mawdudi, South African Ahmed Deedat, and Indian Dr Zakir Naik. Some of the most controversial Ethiopian-authored Christian texts include "May it reach my Muslim compatriots" (1998), by Evangelical Christian Masmara Solomon highly critical of Islam, and "Why I Did Not Become A Muslim", by Alemayyehu Moges. "Religion is a source of threat – Religious leaders need negotiators and preachers need regulations" (in Amharic), *Addis Admas*, 16 December 2011.

²⁶ Some 20 per cent of the population is between fifteen and 24, "The 2007 Census Report", op. cit.

²⁷ The Qadiriyya order, present since the sixteenth century, is widely followed in Wallo and Harar. In other areas, such as Jimma, the newer Tijaniyya order has a large following.

²⁸ Jon Abbink, "Religious freedom and the political order", op. cit., p. 352.

²⁹ Halkano Abdi Wario, "Networking the Nomads: A Study of Tablighi Jamā'at among the Borana of Northern Kenya", PhD dissertation, Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies (2012).

³⁰ Interview, former Somali National Regional State (SNRS) minister, Addis Ababa, 3 September 2014; Terje Østebø, "Salafism, State-Politics, and the Question of 'Extremism' in Ethiopia", *Comparative Islamic Studies*, vol. 8, nos. 1, 2, pp. 165-184.

ist Salafi Takfir Wal Hijira group, most active in Jimma, has been largely driven underground, in part by internal debate within the Muslim intellectual community.³¹

As these newer Islamic currents and associated networks have taken root, tensions have arisen between them and longstanding, often very localised Sufi orders.³² Reformist groups reject a number of Sufi practices as *bida* (heretical innovations) or *shirk* (idolatry); there have even been several instances of radicalised individuals or groups attacking Sufi pilgrims visiting local shrines and destroying the graves of prominent Sufi sheikhs.³³

The growing divergence of Islamic thought and practice in Ethiopia and attendant tensions have regional and ethnic undertones. Historically, particular Sufi schools (*tariqa*) had strongholds among specific regional ethnic communities (Harari and Wallo-Amhara in particular). They were seen as the natural leaders of Ethiopian Islam and have been more resistant to external reformist currents.³⁴ Elsewhere, where conversion to Islam was (relatively) recent and indigenous scholarship less embedded, and where interaction with the wider Islamic world coincided with the rise of (Wahhabist) Saudi Arabia, Salafi influence is stronger; this is especially true of eastern Oromo (Bale and Arsi zones).³⁵ However, theological orientation also plays a part in intra-ethnic group competition, especially in Muslim majority areas, where factions use religious labels, eg, “Wahhabi”, against their rivals (see Chapter V.A.1, below).³⁶

B. *Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOTC) Internal Divisions*

Various strands of faith and charismatic movements have challenged the EOTC's unity. Since the early 1990s, a vigorous neo-conservative youth movement, Mahibere Kidusan (the Association in the Name of Saints), has developed significant grassroots support among educated church members. Making ample use of traditional and modern communications technology and establishing campus fellowships in

³¹ The original al-Takfir wal-Hijra was formed in Egypt under the leadership of Shukri Mustafa, a member of the Muslim Brothers who acquired his revolutionary views through exposure to Sayyid Qutb's writings and his own experience of detention in Egypt's prisons. He believed true Muslims should denounce the society as infidel (hence Al-Takfir) and then withdraw from it as the Prophet withdrew from Mecca (hence al-Hijra). Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°74, *Somalia's Divided Islamists*, 18 May 2010, p. 4; Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°13, *Islamism in North Africa II: Egypt's Opportunity*, 20 April 2004, pp. 3-4. A book by one of the intellectuals, Hassen Taju's, *Takfir: History, Errors and Rectification*, was influential in rallying opinion against Takfir wal-Hijra. Terje Østebø and Wellelign Shemsedin, “The Intellectualist movement in Ethiopia, the Muslim Brotherhood and the issue of moderation”, Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre, March 2015.

³² Meron Zeleke, “The gendering dimension in Sufi contestation of religious orthodoxy: representations of women in a Sufi shrine at Tiru Sina”, in Desplat and Østebø (eds.), op. cit.

³³ Shrines of Sufi saints have been attacked throughout the country: in 1994 pilgrims were attacked at the Yaa shrine close to the Sudan border; in 1994-1995, attacks were reported on annual pilgrimages to the Sheikh Hussein shrine in Bale zone in Oromia; in 1997, there were sporadic attacks on the Sufi shrines in Jimma, including shrines of Sadi in Goma district and Obba shrine in Gera district. Several prominent Sufi sheikhs and custodians of shrines have been killed. Interviews, Assendabo, 3 April 2014; Omo Nada, 4 April 2014.

³⁴ Ethiopia's Islamic leadership has traditionally hailed from Harar and Wallo regions, where Islam dates to the thirteenth century, and there are hundreds of prominent Sufi shrines.

³⁵ Terje Østebø, “The Question of Becoming: Islamic Reform Movements in Contemporary Ethiopia”, Chr. Michelsen Institute Working Papers, 2007 (8), pp. 15-16.

³⁶ Interview, Tabligh cleric, Jijiga, 9 August 2014.

higher-learning institutions, it has attracted young and educated members of the middle class, particularly those critical of the Church's management by older members. The EOTC synod has accused the group not only of promoting generational divisions, but also of attempting to create a schism between Church and government and supporting opposition parties. The government has been apprehensive over Mahibere Kidusan's extensive network and dedicated youth, who have been labelled "extremist" and likened to Salafis.³⁷

C. *Divisions between the Protestant Church and the EOTC*

Theological differences and a lack of mutual recognition continue to spur conflict between the Orthodox and Protestant churches. The EOTC takes pride in its long history and derides the Protestant faith as heresy, traced back to Western missionaries; Protestants claim the mantle of renewal and accuse the Orthodox Church of blurring Christianity's message through veneration of saints and other idiosyncratic rituals.³⁸ Protestant evangelicals have also targeted Orthodox Christians for conversion. Most Protestant converts are former EOTC followers: the "Amanuel fellowship" broke with the Orthodox Church in 1995 and joined the Evangelical Churches Fellowship of Ethiopia in 2004. The 2007 census indicated a rise in Protestantism from 5.5 per cent of the population in 1984 to 18 per cent, while Orthodox Church adherents declined 10.5 per cent, to 43 per cent of the population, over the same period.³⁹ This has inflamed resentment.

Animosities between Protestant and Orthodox communities have at times erupted into violent confrontations in Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Regional State (SNNPRS), Amhara, Tigray and Oromia.⁴⁰ Such outbreaks have declined recently, possibly because the Protestant churches have become more established in many communities, and their development initiatives may have prompted wider acceptance by local communities of other faiths; the Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia (IRCE) and its local committees are likely also to have played a role.

V. Religion and Government

The legacy of faith-state relations – the institutionalised inequality of Islam and privileging of Christianity in the imperial era and the Derg's repression of religion – cast a long shadow, though the EOTC was afforded greater lenience.⁴¹ Since it was the established faith, the Orthodox Church could develop over generations as a national intellectual tradition, though neither the imperial regime nor the Derg encouraged or even

³⁷ As "evidence" of Mahibere Kidusan being politically partisan, the synod points to a commentary the group posted about the controversial 2007 census. Interview, activist and member of the association, Addis Ababa, 22 April 2014.

³⁸ A Protestant group released DVDs ridiculing the EOTC's "worshipping" of Saint Mary; some pastors have also attacked its traditions and canons in their sermons.

³⁹ See Haustein and Østebø, *op. cit.*

⁴⁰ Interview, provincial university lecturer, Addis Ababa, 19 April 2014. Data Barata, "New Religiosity and Changing Intergenerational Relations in Ethiopia", in Erdmute Alber, Sjaak van der Geest and Susan R. Whyte (eds.), *Generations in Africa: Connections and Conflicts* (Hamburg, Münster 2007), pp. 377-399.

⁴¹ Østebø, "Postscript", in Desplat and Østebø (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 250.

particularly tolerated attempts to develop a truly native Islamic intellectual tradition, beyond the highly localised centres of Sufism.

While Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity has historically been more introspective, with a more national aspect, modern Ethiopian Islam has by necessity been more outward looking. The lack of institutions for modern Islamic learning (as opposed to the traditional centres, especially in Harar and Wallo) has pushed Muslims to study abroad.⁴² While there has always been external influence, the past decades have seen a greater penetration of global Islamic discourse, though mostly propagated by Ethiopians.⁴³ However, the government preferred Sufism to Islamic reformist movements, which it viewed as more politically threatening and characterised as foreign.⁴⁴ Gulf-based Islamic missionary and charitable foundations, as well as Western-based Protestant and Evangelical movements, often bring extra financial resources that provide an alternative to federal and regional government control over the equitable distribution of economic resources.

The EPRDF has found the growing assertiveness of faiths in public life troubling, especially since its pluralist stance was supposed to encourage accommodation, not further confrontation. The government's response to increasingly strident religions has been heavy-handed at times, though at pains to be even-handed and non-discriminatory. This strategy has apparently contained, for the most part, more radical faith strands but at the price of tensions with the Orthodox Church and outright confrontation – manifested in popular demonstrations – with Ethiopian Muslims.

A. *Islam*

With greater inclusivity came increased local and regional representation, and in turn greater Muslim visibility in public life and (especially regional) government. But with this have also come tensions between the state and Muslim communities, partly driven by the belief among many that they continue to be discriminated against or excluded by the political establishment, though Muslims, ostensibly at least, are well represented among elite and continue to dominate business.⁴⁵

Many, believing the Muslim population had been deliberately under-recorded to downplay Islam's importance, rejected the official 2007 census figures that declared

⁴² Through the 1970s and 1980s, the Gulf states hosted scores of Ethiopian Muslims seeking to deepen their understanding of Islam. In the 1990s, Sudan similarly opened its universities to Ethiopian Muslims. These students have returned, bringing with them various interpretations of Islam ranging from moderate reformist to more radical activism, including a minority of *takfiri* – broadly those who denounce other Muslims as unbelievers – extremists. Crisis Group interview, local expert in Ethiopian and Somali Islam, Nairobi, 9 November 2015.

⁴³ Østebø, "Salafism, State-Politics", op. cit.

⁴⁴ Government officials, including the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, and government-owned media have referred to various Sufi orders as "*hager bekel islimina*" (home-grown Islam) or "*nebaru islimina*" (indigenous Islam). The EPRDF's publication *Addis Rae* often uses these terms to highlight Sufis' local roots and reformist movements' foreign base.

⁴⁵ The highest-profile examples among numerous Muslim ministers and bureaucrats at federal and regional levels are Ethiopian National Defence Forces Chief of Staff Samora Muhammad Yunis; Deputy Prime Minister Demeke Mekonnen Hassen; Finance and Economic Cooperation Minister Abd-al-Aziz Muhammad; Youth and Sport Minister Redwan Hussein; former chairman of the National Election Board and Federal Supreme Court President Kemal Bedri; recently retired, long-serving Finance Minister Sufian Ahmed; and influential businessman Mohammed Hussein Ali al-Amoudi.

the country to have a Christian majority.⁴⁶ A ban on complete veiling prompted protests in colleges and universities in the capital and beyond, and the government barred group prayer in universities and schools.⁴⁷ It has argued, in particular in relation to the latter restriction, that these measures apply equally to all religions; the Muslim community has, nevertheless, perceived them as discrimination. Similarly, the requirement that Muslim religious organisations register and periodically renew their licenses also provokes resentment and claims of discrimination, given that the Orthodox Church is exempt, as a religion established by law since the imperial period. Many Muslims question not only the basic fairness of this distinction, but also whether the regulation accords with constitutional commitments to religious freedom and equality.

1. The Mejlis, Al-Ahbash and local dynamics

The primary driver for some Muslim disillusionment with the EPRDF government has been perceived interference over the leadership of the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council, popularly known as the “Mejlis”. The institution gained sudden attention when an internal dispute erupted into violent conflict in February 1995 at Addis Ababa’s Anwar Mosque; twelve were killed and 129 injured.⁴⁸ The government subsequently took an increased interest in the Mejlis and its leadership, which coincided with increased anxiety over subversive activity following armed Islamist attacks in Addis Ababa and elsewhere in 1995 and 1996.⁴⁹

The issues of Mejlis leadership and autonomy have been complicated since mid-2011 by the government’s championing of the Sufi order Al-Ahbash, which it considered an indigenous antidote to externally inspired Islamism.⁵⁰ Al-Ahbash was invited to give training that year through the Mejlis and its regional branches to all national, regional and local Muslim religious leaders (imams, scholars, and teachers), so as to instill “authentic Islamic teachings”.⁵¹

Ethiopia’s religiously and ethnically homogenous Muslim Somali National Regional state (also known as the Ogaden region) was first to offer stiff resistance to Al-Ahbash’s imposition. Reportedly, the federal government working with the then Somali regional president, Daud Mohamed Ali, initially attempted to remove Salafi representatives from the regional Mejlis and replace them with Al-Ahbash adherents. This was staunchly opposed by both local Salafis and Sufis. Hostility to Al-Ahbash was heightened by perceptions that its teachings were introducing too many ele-

⁴⁶ Christians argue that the government deliberately inflated the number of Muslims since the latter are seen as supportive of the EPRDF; see fn. 10 above for the 2007 census figures.

⁴⁷ “A Draft to Regulate Religious Practices in Educational Institutions”, education ministry directive, 2008 (in Amharic).

⁴⁸ Though the Derg allowed Muslims to establish a representative body, the Mejlis was only constituted as a legal entity after 1991. Major issues driving the power struggle within it included corruption scandals and donations from Islamic countries, including Saudi Arabia. The Muslim Youth Association led the resistance to the Mejlis through much of the 1990s.

⁴⁹ See Haustein and Østebø, pp. 761-762; and fn. 7 above.

⁵⁰ Founded by an Ethiopian (Harari) cleric in Lebanon, Al-Ahbash (formally The Association of Islamic Charitable Projects, *Jam’iyyat al-Mashari’ al-Khayriyya al-Islamiyya*) gained prominence in Lebanon in the 1980s. Mustafa Kabha and Haggai Erlich, “Al-Ahbash and Wahhabiyya: Interpretations of Islam”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 38, no. 4 (2006), pp. 519-538.

⁵¹ An initial seminar was held in Harar then rolled out nationwide. Interview, member of regional SNRS Islamic Affairs Council, Jijiga, 7 August 2014.

ments close to Shia belief.⁵² When in July 2010 Abdi Mohamed Omar “Iley” was elected regional president, following Daud’s ouster, he reportedly moved to limit Al-Ahbash influence.⁵³ Yet, his motives appear rooted as much in local power struggles, as they were a defence of local sensitivities around religious autonomy;⁵⁴ these political considerations were later borne out by a reported switch back to Al-Ahbash sympathisers against Salafi influence.⁵⁵

2. The Friday protests

Though the federal government’s enthusiasm for Al-Ahbash seems to have waned, the Mejlis leadership remains contested; many Muslims believe its council is co-opted.⁵⁶ In March 2012, against a backdrop of growing popular Muslim protests, religious scholars from various federal regions, the Ethiopian Muslim Arbitration Committee, presented their concerns to the federal affairs ministry, including Mejlis legitimacy and imposition of Al-Ahbash doctrine. The government agreed to new Mejlis elections, but via the lowest government administrative units (*kebele*) rather than mosques, as the committee had recommended. As a result, the new Mejlis leadership maintained a degree of continuity with the old, pro-government figures as chair and vice chair.⁵⁷

Protests continued (mostly in Addis Ababa), with scores of demonstrators taking to the streets each Friday between January 2012 and August 2013 to protest perceived government interference. Some turned violent; in April 2012, for example, ten protesters were killed in Assasa town (Arsi zone, Oromia state) in clashes with federal police.⁵⁸ In the second half of 2012, the government moved against both the Friday protests and the Ethiopian Muslim Arbitration Committee. Several committee leaders, protesters, and journalist Yusuf Ahmed, editor of a magazine sympathetic to the protesters’ grievances, were arrested; in 2015 the federal high court convicted them of attempted terrorism and conspiracy under the 2009 Anti-Terrorism Proclamation.⁵⁹

Despite the crackdown, demonstrations continued amid increasing international attention and calls for global Muslim solidarity. Partly in response, the government in February 2013 released a controversial documentary, “The Jihad Movement in Ethio-

⁵² Sufi orders are largely Sunni, as is Salafism (Wahhabism).

⁵³ Interview, former member of national Islamic Affairs Council, Addis Ababa, 10 August 2014.

⁵⁴ Among a number of internal power disputes at the time of the Al-Ahbash push in the region, the federal government and the SNRS leadership had signed a peace deal with the Salafi-inclined United Western Somalia Liberation Front (UWSLF), which was previously fighting for a greater Somalia under Islamic rule. It was a small but effective rival to the larger and perceived as “Sufi-oriented” and secessionist Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF). Both armed groups had bases across the border in Somalia. Interview, former member of national Islamic Affairs Council, Addis Ababa, 10 August 2014; Crisis Group Africa Report N°207, *Ethiopia: Prospects for Peace in Ogaden*, 6 August 2013, p. 14.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interview, local expert in Ethiopian and Somali Islam, Nairobi, 3 February 2016.

⁵⁶ “When I was growing up, a mosque in a village had nothing to do with government or region or even district. ... Nowadays the village mosque is controlled from Addis Ababa through the council in Jijiga. This resembles the organisation of the churches”. Crisis Group interview, Salafi scholar, Nairobi, 15 July 2014.

⁵⁷ The protests started at Awolia College, Ethiopia’s only Muslim college, in January 2012 and soon gathered momentum. Marches were regularly held after Friday prayers at Addis Ababa’s major mosques. Abbink, “Religious freedom and the political order”, op. cit., pp. 353-355.

⁵⁸ “Briefing: Ethiopia’s Muslim Protests”, IRIN News, 15 November 2012.

⁵⁹ The sentences ranged from seven to 22 years in prison; “Court passes guilty verdict on Ethiopian Muslim arbitration committee members et. al.”, *Addis Standard*, 7 July 2015.

pia”, asserting a direct link between the arbitration committee leaders and al-Qaeda.⁶⁰ Opposition party members and non-Muslims, not least the opposition-oriented Ethiopian Church Synod in Exile, sent messages of solidarity with the detained protest leaders, which, given their stance on other issues, the government could dismiss as political opportunism.⁶¹

Since the summer of 2013, the protest movement has largely died out, in part due to the arrest and trial of its leaders. But expressions of discontent still exist: graffiti in parts of Addis Ababa, night-time distribution of leaflets and posters and online social media and blog posts all indicate that the source of tensions – at the very least frustration among Muslim youth that they are excluded from the political establishment, and their prospects are limited – have not yet been adequately addressed.⁶²

B. *The Orthodox Church and Mahibere Kidusan*

Government interference in the EOTC’s religious affairs has also been a major source of contention. Many Orthodox Church members believe that the 1991 abdication of Merkorios as abuna (patriarch), following the EPRDF’s assumption of power, and the appointment of Abuna Paulos were part of a wider government scheme to exert control.⁶³ Paulos, patriarch from 1992-2012, was controversial, particularly due to his perceived support for the EPRDF. His mild interventions during the 2005 election crisis disappointed many.⁶⁴ In recent years, however, the most evident controversy has been around Mahibere Kidusan. As with government attempts to keep a hand in the Islamic Affairs Councils, many Orthodox Christians have viewed government criticism of that neo-conservative youth movement as aimed at sowing discord within the Church.⁶⁵

VI. Conclusion

Religion and religious tensions in Ethiopia – though in many ways unique due to the millennia-long presence of both Christianity and Islam – reflect broader regional and global trends. The country has not experienced anything like the faith-based revolutions, wars and violent extremism in neighbouring Sudan, Somalia and Kenya, but perceptions of discrimination and exclusion, as well as resistance to top-down government, have been constant drivers of past social revolutions and ethno-regional rebellions.

The experiences of its neighbours have also meant that, until recently, the government has been particularly wary of regional external influences (sometimes fundamentalist) on its faith-based communities and their ideologies. It has tended, con-

⁶⁰ The documentary backfired, however, when leaked interrogation footage showed the leaders chained. “Jihadawi Harakat – An Ethiopian gov’t propaganda film that irritates Moslems and Christians”, video, YouTube, February 2013, <http://bit.ly/1Sldpj4>.

⁶¹ The arrests were one of the grievances raised at the June 2013 “Blue Party” opposition rally. “Thousands stage anti-government protest”, Horn Affairs, 2 June 2013.

⁶² Crisis Group interview, regional security analyst, Addis Ababa, 5 November 2015.

⁶³ Since the EOTC gained formal autonomy from the (Egyptian) Coptic Church in 1951, the abuna is the head of the Church. After abdicating, Merkorios went into U.S. exile. A Synod in Exile has been established in support of his claim to be the rightful EOTC leader.

⁶⁴ Interview, Mahibere Kidusan member/supporter, Dessie, April 2014.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

sequently, to focus its counter-radicalisation efforts on guarding against unwanted external influence. In the last few years, however, its concerns have shifted to home-grown religious activism, particularly groups it perceives as having a partisan political agenda favouring certain opposition groups, as well as those it suspects are promoting violent extremism. While the government can claim to be even-handed, for example criticising the rise of the neo-conservative and Orthodox Mahibere Kidusan as well as action against specific incidents of Christian chauvinism, it has not attempted to exert the same theological influence on the EOTC synod as it did by promoting Al-Ahbash in the Mejlis.

State intervention is routine in most aspects of public life, but the faithful have bridled against government interference in their religion with unusual vehemence, partly due to the reversals in religious freedoms experienced in the early 1990s. Circumstances have changed since then, due both to the growing extremist threat and the polarising 2005 elections. The government has become extremely cautious about allowing religious groups too much self-regulation, for example through truly independent inter- and intra-religious councils. On the extremism front, it must feel its vigilance has been vindicated by experience elsewhere, most pertinently in Kenya, where the general liberalisation during the 1990s and 2000s, combined with continuing Muslim grievances, allowed a network of radicalising individuals to take over mosques and madrasas.⁶⁶

However, as the November 2015 resurgence of ethno-national protests in Oromia has demonstrated, the urge to implement top-down decisions without substantive dialogue and regardless of opposition has tended to elicit violence.⁶⁷ While episodes of faith-based communal violence and anti-government protests have been contained, they have not necessarily been resolved. Regional and global experience cautions that successful compromise through political accommodation becomes less likely if believers feel political reform is frustrated and their aspirations are thwarted, and they retreat into faith-based radicalism as an attractive and powerful alternative to secular, dominant-party rule.⁶⁸

Nairobi/Brussels, 22 February 2016

⁶⁶ Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°102, *Kenya: Al-Shabaab – Closer to Home*, 25 September 2014; and Africa Briefing N°85, *Kenyan Somali Islamist Radicalisation*, 25 January 2012.

⁶⁷ “Ethiopia: Death toll rises to 5 as protests in Oromia mark third week”, Horn Affairs, 9 December 2015; “Ethiopia’s Oromos Tread Warily Amid Anti-government Protests”, VOA, 23 December 2015.

⁶⁸ The global dimensions of Islamic extremism penetrated Ethiopia’s usually introspective politics in April 2015, as a Libya-based militia professing loyalty to the Islamic State (IS) executed 30 Ethiopian migrants. This prompted a large demonstration in Addis Ababa that began to express anti-government sentiments, prompting a security forces intervention. “Islamic State murders spur protests in Ethiopia’s capital”, Bloomberg (online), 22 April 2015.

Appendix A: Map of Ethiopia

