

# ETHIOPIA

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USCIRF continues to monitor the situation in Ethiopia where, despite some improvements, the government continues to engage in religious freedom violations. Although Ethiopia has valid concerns about terrorism, the government has overreacted, prosecuting and cracking down on peaceful Muslim demonstrators protesting against government interference in the internal religious affairs of their community. This crackdown has taken place in an authoritarian environment in which freedom of speech, press, and assembly and human rights and independent interfaith and conflict resolution efforts are restricted.

## Background

Ethiopia has a long history of religious tolerance and inter-religious cooperation, and its constitution protects freedom of religion or belief and provides for separation of religion and state. However, in 2011 the government made efforts to impose a particular Islamic interpretation on the country's Muslim community.

separation of religion and state and does not promote a particular religious belief. Imams who refused to preach al-Ahbash ideology were dismissed from their positions and replaced with other imams, and some were jailed. The Aweliya Islamic School in Addis Ababa was closed in December 2011.

In response to the trainings and school closing, Muslims in Addis Ababa and several other Ethiopian cities held peaceful protests in mosques after Friday prayers, calling on the government to respect constitutional protections for separation of religion and state and end its interference in their community's internal religious affairs. While the Ethiopian government generally allowed the demonstrations to occur without interference for the first half of 2012, almost a thousand protestors were arrested in July of that year. Protestors were also beaten, and there were reports of police use of teargas and live ammunition against them. Most of those arrested were later released, but in October 2012, authorities charged 29 people connected with

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In response to long-standing government concerns of rising extremism in the country, the Ethiopian Ministry of Federal Affairs and the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC) from July to December 2011 held mandatory "religious tolerance" trainings for all imams and Islamic school teachers and administrators in the Addis Ababa and the Amhara, Harar, and Omiriyah regions. The trainings were led by Lebanese al-Ahbash clerics and promoted the al-Ahbash Islamic ideology. The Ethiopian government denies its involvement in the promotion of al-Ahbash and reaffirmed to USCIRF that it respects the constitution's provision of

the protests with planning terrorism. In December the charges were amended to engaging in terrorism. Those charged include nine members of an Arbitration Committee tasked by the protestors to negotiate with the government on their demands.

Further, Muslims called for elections of new EIASC leadership who at the time has been government appointed. While elections were held in September 2012, protestors denounced the elections' credibility, complaining of government interference and that those individuals voted into leadership positions did not reflect the preferences of the community.

## Current Situation

Since USCIRF's December 2012 visit to Ethiopia, al-Ahbash trainings and promotion have stopped. However, dismissed imams have not been permitted to resume their posts and the Aweliya Islamic School remains closed. Protests have continued intermittently and on a smaller scale than in 2012, although

Ethiopian officials both privately and publicly; offer a visit to Ethiopia by U.S. government officials and international counterterrorism experts to discuss best practices to combat religious extremism and to facilitate interreligious dialogue; increase engagement with Ethiopia's Muslim and Christian communities on religious freedom issues, including through educational and

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efforts to reignite weekly protests started in January 2014. Protests in July and August 2013 were met with government force with an unconfirmed number of persons killed and arrested.

The trial against the protestors continued during this reporting period and was held in secret. In February 2013, the Ethiopian government aired on Ethiopia TV *Jihadawi Harekat* (Holy War Movement) a program which portrayed the protesters and those arrested as terrorists. USCIRF noted its concern that the program could prejudice the outcome of their trial. In December 2013, 10 of the 29 individuals detained had their charges dropped and were released from prison, including two members of the Arbitration Committee. (See appendix for names of remaining prisoners.) Two NGOs were also found not guilty: Albi Development and Co-Operation Association and Nema Humanitarian Association. The trial is ongoing for the remaining 19, although the charges were reduced from engaging in acts of terrorism to planning acts of terrorism.

cultural exchanges, the International Visitor Leadership Program, and lectures by visiting American scholars and experts; and urge the Ethiopian government to repeal the Civil Society Organizations Proclamation to allow for U.S. funding of programs to advance freedom of religion or belief, and inter- and intra-faith engagement.

## Recommendations

Ethiopia is one of the United States' strongest allies in Africa, despite the Ethiopian government's increasingly authoritarian actions and human rights violations. To address the ongoing concerns in Ethiopia, USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government: raise concerns about religious freedom violations and the ongoing trials and arrests of peaceful Muslim protestors with