

## **OTHER COUNTRIES AND REGIONS MONITORED: ETHIOPIA**

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Over the past year and a half, concerns about religious freedom in Ethiopia have increased due to reports of government efforts to impose a particular Islamic interpretation on the country's Muslim community. Throughout 2012, Ethiopian Muslims protested government interference in their internal religious affairs, holding almost weekly demonstrations following Friday prayers. In November 2012, USCIRF issued a press release expressing concerns about the forcible application of a particular form of Islam on the Ethiopian Muslim community and the charging of 29 protestors with terrorism. In December, a USCIRF delegation visited Addis Ababa to learn more about the situation. The delegation met with Ethiopian government officials, such as the Minister of Federal Affairs and State Minister of Foreign Affairs, as well as representatives from the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC), the U.S. Ambassador to Ethiopia, the Interim Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the government Human Rights Commission, and several non-governmental human rights and interfaith organizations. USCIRF also met with Muslim protestors and attorneys representing protestors who are in jail. USCIRF will continue to monitor closely the ongoing trial of the charged protestors and religious freedom conditions for both the Muslim and Christian communities. Developments in these two areas will influence how USCIRF will report on Ethiopia in next year's annual report.

### **BACKGROUND**

Ethiopia has a long history of religious tolerance and its constitution protects freedom of religion or belief and provides for separation of religion and state. Inter-religious marriage and conversion are socially acceptable and there is an established tradition of religious organizations working together. However, Ethiopia has experienced religious freedom problems, particularly at the local level with regard to access to land to build houses of worship and for cemeteries. There also have been sporadic instances of inter-religious violence, although the Ethiopian government has made a concerted effort to hold perpetrators accountable and maintain religious harmony.

### **MANDATORY TRAININGS**

From July to December 2011, the Ethiopian Ministry of Federal Affairs and the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC) held mandatory "religious tolerance" trainings for all imams and Islamic school teachers and administrators in the Addis Ababa and the Amhara, Harar, and Omiriyia regions. The trainings, paid for by the Ethiopian government, were in response to long-standing government concerns of rising Wahhabism in Ethiopia and religious violence in the Jimma region in March 2011, when Muslims torched over 60 Christian churches and homes after a reported Qur'an desecration.

Program participants told USCIRF that the trainings were led by al-Ahbash clerics from Lebanon and were organized by the government to promote the al-Ahbash Islamic ideology. The Minister of Federal Affairs and the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, by contrast, stated to the USCIRF delegation that the government played no role in the al-Ahbash trainings. They stated that government officials present at the trainings only educated participants about constitutional provisions related to religious freedom and separation of religion and state. Officials also rejected USCIRF's concerns that the government was promoting a particular religious belief, claiming that the government respects individuals' rights to religious belief of all interpretations. Notably, they also said that they do not violate religious freedom or intervene in religious affairs unless "red lines" are crossed, which were not defined.

### **DISMISSAL OF IMAMS AND SCHOOL CLOSING**

USCIRF received reports of imams who refused to preach al-Ahbash ideology being dismissed from their positions and replaced with other imams. Representatives of the Muslim community provided USCIRF with the names of at least 15 imams fired, and at times jailed, in 2012. Ethiopian government officials denied to USCIRF that they have fired clerics who refused to preach the al-Ahbash ideology. However, they did acknowledge the closing of the Aweliya Islamic School in Addis Ababa in December 2011,

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which they claimed, without providing proof, advocated for a violent Salafi/Wahabbi interpretation of Islam.

### **PROTESTS AND ARRESTS**

In response to the required trainings and the closing of the Aweliya Islamic School, Muslims in Addis Ababa and several other Ethiopian cities held peaceful protests in mosques after Friday prayers throughout this reporting period. Protestors told USCIRF that they are 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. The Ethiopian government has generally allowed Muslim protests to occur without interference, yet USCIRF also received reports of protestors being harassed and monitored throughout this reporting period. Almost a thousand protestors were arrested in July while planning a charity event and protests to coincide with an upcoming African Union Summit in Addis Ababa. Protestors were beaten and arrested, with some witnesses alleging police use of teargas and live ammunition against protestors. Almost all the individuals arrested were later released. Additionally, media coverage of the protests has been banned in Ethiopia with several reporters being arrested.

### **TERRORISM CHARGES AGAINST PROTESTERS**

On October 29, 2012, authorities charged 29 people connected with the protests under the Anti-Terror Proclamation, accused of "intending to advance a political, religious or ideological cause" by force and the "planning, preparation, conspiracy, incitement and attempt of terrorist acts." On December 18, the charges were changed to engaging in acts of terrorism. Those charged include nine members of the Arbitration Committee tasked by the protestors to negotiate with the government on their demands, including the editor-in-chief of the magazine *Ye'Muslimoch Guday* Yusuf Getachew, and Habiba Mohammed, the wife of the former Minister of Civil Service. Mohammed has specifically been accused of accepting funds from the Saudi embassy to promote religious extremism. Attorneys for 28 of the 29 charged told USCIRF during the Commission's December trip that their clients have been tortured and the lawyers have been hampered in their ability to meet with those imprisoned. The trial is ongoing. USCIRF requested to meet with the 29, but the request was not granted.

### **ETHIOPIAN ISLAMIC AFFAIRS SUPREME COUNCIL**

There are also concerns about undue government interference over the government-backed EIASC. At the time of the trainings in 2011, those who composed the EIASC were appointed by the government, not elected by the Muslim community per national laws. The government did agree to protestors' demands and allowed new elections for the EIASC to occur in October 2012. However, numerous interlocutors told USCIRF before, during, and after its December trip that the election was not free and fair, as the government interfered with the final voting. In its meeting with USCIRF, EIASC members almost word for word reiterated the government's talking points about the Ethiopian government's respect for separation of religion and state. Some EIASC members also used charged language, referring to protestors against the government's interference as "terrorists," despite the fact that some of the new EIASC members themselves participated in the protests before being elected to the Council. Of note, Ethiopian Orthodox Christians also complain of government interference in the leadership of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.