

# ETHIOPIA 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The country is a secular state; 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.

In January, three persons at the Keraneyo Mehanealem church, an Ethiopian Orthodox Tawehedo church (EOTC) in Woybela Mariam in Oromia Region, were reportedly killed and 10 injured after Oromia police opened fire during an Epiphany parade. According to media reports, in August, Roman Catholic bishops warned that insecurity was leading churches to close and forcing more priests and nuns to flee due to the conflict, which saw major fighting in Afar, Amhara, and Tigray in the north of the country. While urging the parties in the conflict to end the suffering, Cardinal Surafel Berhaneyesus said citizens in many places were still being killed and exiled because of their Tigrayan identity. On November 2, the government and Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) signed a cessation of hostilities agreement (COHA) to end the conflict. In April, members of the Muslim community protested in Addis Ababa during Ramadan after school officials prohibited students from conducting *salat* prayers (regular daytime prayers) at school. The Addis Ababa Education Bureau resolved the matter by allowing students to conduct prayers during the school day outside of the campus grounds.

In April, rioters reportedly killed over 20 Muslim individuals during three days of violence in response to the funeral of a Muslim cleric in Gondar. In October, media outlets reported that an armed group killed an EOTC deacon and kidnapped 11 worshippers at Gebre Guracha Town in Oromia Region. In November, the *Ethiopia Observer* website reported that gunmen killed at least 15 persons and injured others while they gathered for worship at the Muleta Gela Ethiopian Evangelical Mekane Yesus Church (EECMY), an evangelical Protestant church located in Galo Kebele, East Wollega, Oromia Region. In January,

evangelical Protestants and the EOTC disagreed over the ownership and usage of Meskel Square in Addis Ababa. In February, the EOTC split into two and a separate faction established the Tigrayan Orthodox Tawehedo Church (TOTC). In July, the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC) changed leadership from Sufi Hajji Mufti Omer Idris to Salafist Hajji Ibrahim Tufa.

U.S. government officials met with senior religious leaders to advocate peaceful resolution to conflicts in the north and elsewhere around the country. This included an April 14 meeting with EOTC Patriarch Abune Mathias as well as July meetings in Gondar with local religious leaders and the opening of a Jewish community center in Debre Birhan, where U.S. officials participated in the launch ceremony and engaged with the local community. The Chargé d’Affaires hosted an interfaith iftar on April 20 and discussed the unique history of religion in the country. The U.S. embassy provided funding to faith-based organizations, including the Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia (IRCE), to implement community projects aimed at long-term peacebuilding and religious tolerance, among other goals.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 114 million (midyear 2022). According to 2016 U.S. government estimates, the most recent available, 44 percent of the population adheres to the EOTC, 31 percent are Sunni Muslim, and 23 percent belong to evangelical Christian and Pentecostal groups, including the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Ethiopian Kale Heywet Church, and EECMY. Most observers believe the evangelical Christian and Pentecostal proportion of the population has increased since the last national census was conducted in 2007. A majority of individuals in Tigray are adherents of the TOTC or EOTC, and those in Amhara are adherents of the EOTC, while Islam is most prevalent in Afar, Oromia, and Somali Regions. Protestant churches have the most adherents in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People’s (SNNP) Region and Gambella Region, and in parts of Oromia Region. The largest concentration of Roman

Catholics is in Tigray, representing approximately 38 percent of Tigray's population, according to the 2007 census.

Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Eastern Rite and Roman Catholics, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, members of Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, and practitioners of Indigenous religions. Waaqeffanna – a monotheist Indigenous religion in Oromia Region – reportedly continued to grow (estimates are unclear and range from 300,000 to over a million adherents) on university campuses and among the Oromo community; its belief system is unique to the Oromo culture. The Rastafarian community numbers approximately 1,000, and its members primarily reside in Addis Ababa and the town of Shashemene in Oromia Region. Rastafarianism has roots in the EOTC and uses the EOTC Bible.

## **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. 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 once every five years; failure to do so may result in a fine. 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 in 1960 during the imperial era that is still in force.

Registered religious organizations are required to provide annual activity and financial reports. Registered umbrella associations such as the EOTC and the EIASC are granted special privileges, with auditing only required every three- to-five years. 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, in accordance with the constitutionally required separation of religion and state. The law prohibits prayer in schools. The federal government also 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 but allows 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**

In January, Oromia police reportedly shot and killed three persons and injured 10 at the Keraneyo Mehanealem Church, an EOTC church in Woybela Mariam in Oromia Region, during an Epiphany parade. Violence between EOTC and non-EOTC followers during the procession was allegedly due to EOTC parishioners' use of Amhara flags, which do not feature a star, unlike the official flag of Ethiopia. Non-Amhara and non-EOTC adherents viewed starless flags as representing imperialist rule and Amhara ethnonationalism.

According to media reports, in August, Catholic bishops warned that a weakened security environment and raids by local militias in Afar, Amahara, and Tigray Regions in the north of the country led to the closing of churches and the fleeing of priests and nuns to Addis Ababa. The bishops reiterated the lack of security made it difficult for the church to effectively carry out its pastoral work in many

parishes, including those in the diocese of Adigrat, in Tigray. Bishop Tesfasselassie Medhin of Adigrat, his priests, and individuals in Tigray Region said they were cut off from the rest of the country for more than 20 months due to a blockade during part of the year as the conflict continued. While urging the parties in the conflict to focus on peace, dialogue, and reconciliation to end the violence, Cardinal Surafel Berhaneyesus said citizens in many places were still being killed and exiled because of their Tigrayan identity. On November 2, the government and TPLF signed a COHA to end the conflict.

Some violence was reportedly sparked by religious organizations' disputes around the ownership and use of land and landmarks, such as Meskel Square in Addis Ababa. In January, local news outlets reported Addis Ababa Mayor Adanech Abiebie made what some EOTC faithful viewed as an inflammatory speech during a Protestant fundraising event held in Meskel Square. The mayor stated the square had been built with taxpayer money and therefore was for the use of all Ethiopians. The statement angered some EOTC members, who believe Meskel Square belongs to them and that use of the square by other faiths must be restricted. On February 6, Mayor Adanech resolved the issue with EOTC Patriarch Abune Mathias and reiterated that the square was public space open to all. Despite the statement, some EOTC leaders and faithful continued to object to other denominations' use of Meskel Square.

In April, during Ramadan, members of the Muslim community in Addis Ababa protested after school officials prohibited students from conducting salat prayers (regular daytime prayers) in school. Previously, school officials had tolerated the prayers even though the law prohibits prayer in schools. The Addis Ababa Education Bureau resolved the matter by allowing students to conduct prayers during the school day outside of the campus grounds.

In May, after months of planning and consultation with the Addis Ababa mayor's office, organizers attempted to hold a world-record iftar that stretched 2.73 miles from Meskel Square to Mexico Square and beyond. The *Addis Standard* and *Africa News* reported the event was peaceful. *ABC News*, however, reported

police arrested 76 persons and discharged tear gas and weapons at a protest during festival prayers at Addis Ababa stadium. The gunshots and use of tear gas were later found to be to unintentional discharges by police.

In August, according to the *Reporter Ethiopia*, the government's second National Financial Inclusion Strategy included Islamic interest-free financial services, insurance, and microfinance. Legal and regulatory research by the National Council for Financial Inclusion to expand Islamic banking services continued during the year.

All schools, including religious ones, faced challenges due to budgetary constraints as a result of the northern conflict. The *Reporter Ethiopia* reported the Ministry of Education estimated 4.2 million students were unable to study due to drought and conflict. Despite budgetary constraints, the government still provided funding to religious schools, including 250 Catholic schools and 219 Islamic schools, although at a lesser rate.

On June 14, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed said religious organizations should maintain financial transparency and be morally upright. During a speech to the House of Peoples Representatives, Prime Minister Abiy asked, "Why are religious institutions not paying tax, getting land for free without a lease, and not get audited in Ethiopia? ... In Ethiopia, we allowed this, assuming they would do things the government would not do: things like building the inner human being, working on morals, and love for peace... The reality is different, and there is a high level of corruption and lack of morality [within religious institutions]." Representatives of the largest religious groups, the EOTC, EIASC, and the Ethiopian Evangelical Churches (EEC), interpreted the statement as a warning to keep their organizations, their leaders, and their followers honest. They said the government had been fair and complimented Abiy on securing recognition of umbrella organizations such as the EOTC and the EIASC.

The government continued to issue residency status and identity cards to largely stateless Rastafarians, individuals who moved to the country from around the world during the government of Haile Selassie and their descendants.

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

Human rights groups stated that violence intensified during the year in the conflict in northern Ethiopia, based on a variety of factors. Because ethnicity and religion are closely linked and because criminality, politics, access to resources, and historical grievances were also drivers of violence in the country, it was often difficult to determine whether some incidents were based on religion, other factors, or a combination thereof.

On the weekend of April 4, media outlets reported that tensions erupted between the EECMY and the EOTC Trinity Church following an April 2 groundbreaking ceremony at the construction site for a new seminary in the Mekanisa Area, Nifas Silk Sub City, Addis Ababa. In the week preceding the ceremony, youths from the EECMY church and nearby EOTC Trinity Church engaged in verbal sparring over who owned the land on which the seminary was located. On April 3, *Amba Digital* reported that a group of approximately 40 men stormed an EECMY church approximately three miles away in Kora, Akiki Woreda, Oromia, and attacked worshippers while they prayed. The attackers killed one worshipper, injured eight, and damaged the church. In an April 4 statement, the EECMY condemned the attack and called for the EOTC to do the same. The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project reported that Oromia Special Forces had to intervene to stabilize the situation.

In April, over 20 Muslims were reportedly killed following three days of violence after the funeral of a Muslim cleric. The violence was reportedly sparked by Muslim youths taking stones from the Orthodox side of the burial ground to decorate the cleric's gravesite on the Islamic side of the graveyard. Subsequently, EOTC and Muslim youths clashed for three days; on the first day of disturbances, rioters reportedly killed three individuals. The *Addis Standard* reported that the

Amhara State Islamic Affairs Council demanded action after the death toll rose to 21. The Islamic social media channel *Harun Media* blamed the clashes on tensions following anti-Muslim rhetoric from EOTC factions and expressed concerns over an increase of Muslim-owned businesses and Muslims acquiring land in traditionally Orthodox areas of Gondar. The *Ethiopia Observer* reported that 280 persons were arrested in Gondar in response to the violence. In the days after the attack, the *Ethiopia Observer* reported a wave of protests, during which protesters damaged and destroyed churches in Silte Zone, SNNP Region, and mosques in Debark Town, Amhara Region.

*Wazema Radio* and *Orthodoxy Daily News* (via Twitter) reported that on the night of October 29, an armed militia killed a deacon and kidnapped 11 worshippers during a night-time liturgical service at Gebre Guracha Town, Oromia Region. Investigations continued through year's end, by which time the kidnapers had released two of the kidnapped worshippers for a ransom but continued to hold nine others.

On November 12, the *Ethiopia Observer* reported gunmen killed at least 15 persons and injured more as worshippers gathered for services at the Muleta Gela EECMY Church, an evangelical Protestant church located in Galo Kebele, East Wollega, Oromia Region. In a media briefing, Yonas Yigezu Dibisa, the head of the EECMY, condemned the killing of worshippers "in the strongest terms" and expressed regret and concern at what he saw as a lack of response from government security forces. He also said gunmen killed 14 clerics and worshippers returning from church in Mendi, West Welega, Oromia Region, a few weeks earlier. Investigations continued at year's end.

The northern conflict directly affected the EOTC, with many Tigrayans saying they felt ignored and neglected by Addis Ababa-based religious leaders. According to a February 14 social media post by *Tghat Media*, the head of the TOTC, Patriarchate Abune Merhakirstos, stated, "The link with Addis (EOTC) is broken. We can't live with those who massacre us." He described the Church of Tigray as autocephalous and expressed its intent to form its own synod. As a result, on

February 17, the new TOTC patriarchate issued a statement officially splitting from the EOTC. The statement declared TOTC services would only be conducted in Tigrinya (Tigrayan language), all documents and manuscripts would be translated from Ge'ez (an ancient Ethiopian Semitic language used by the EOTC) and Amharic into Tigrinya, and the TOTC would no longer report to EOTC authorities in Addis Ababa. After the November signing of the COHA, however, EOTC leaders said they were hopeful the TOTC would reunite with the EOTC.

According to media reports, in July, following months of debate and infighting between Sufi and Salafist factions, the EIASC held a long overdue election resulting in the stepping down of long-serving President Sufi Hajji Mufti Omer Idris and the appointment of Salafist Hajji Ibrahim Tufa as president. The Mejlis (another name for the EIASC) also saw the appointment of a new executive board and general assembly. The change in leadership was met with mixed reactions, with some Sufi factions calling it a coup by more religiously conservative elements and Salafi factions calling it a redress of administrative issues and the fulfilment of the Council's bylaws. The Ethiopian News Agency reported that in the days following his appointment, President Hajji Ibrahim urged unity among the Muslim community and called on it to resist efforts to divide them.

Waaqeffanna – an Indigenous religion in Oromia Region unique to Oromo culture – reportedly continued to grow on university campuses and among the Oromo population. Some contacts described Waaqeffanna as being such a strong part of Oromo ethnonationalist identity that Oromo police targeted and accused them of associating with the outlawed Oromo Liberation Army insurgent group.

While a majority of the Rastafarian community resided in Shashamene town in Oromia, around 155 miles south of Addis Ababa, many moved to Addis Ababa for work or other reasons. Many Rastafari do not speak Amharic or Affan Oromo, complicating connections with local communities who viewed them with suspicion and questioned their spiritual use of marijuana.

Ethiopian Jews in Gondar continued to migrate to Israel with the help of international nongovernmental organizations and charities. There were also isolated Beta Israel or “Hidden Jewish” communities in Kechene, outside of Addis Ababa, and Debre Birhan, in Amhara Region. Hundreds of Tigrayan Jews fleeing the conflict in the north arrived in Debre Birhan and other Jewish communities. While free to practice their form of Judaism, which, depending on the community, can differ from modern Judaic practice, the Beta Israel community reported that it sometimes faced social exclusion from the majority EOTC community. They also reported accusations of using witchcraft to bring harm to non-Jewish members of the community.

The IRCE continued to include representatives from the EOTC, EIASC, Roman Catholic Church, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and several evangelical Christian groups, such as the EECMY and the Ethiopian Kale Heywet Church.

The interreligious councils of Shashamene and West Arsi zone, in partnership with the Catholic Church Social Development Commission Robe Branch Office, established office space, personnel, and training for conflict prevention and peace messaging to support and improve the ability for local inter-religious councils to advocate, message, and teach peace building and solidarity. Local partners conducted dialogue, peace messaging by mobile vehicle-mounted loudspeaker, unified preaching of peace across all seven religious organizations, and peace messaging on FM radio. Local partners also distributed 1,000 pamphlets reinforcing messages of social cohesion and designed to help mitigate conflict.

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

On April 13, the U.S. Chargé met with EOTC Patriarch Abune Matthias. They discussed the need for peace and reconciliation and for aid to reach all persons in need. On April 20, the Chargé held an interfaith iftar at her residence with the then EIASC President, Hajji Mufti Omer Idris. Representatives from the EIASC, EOTC, EEC, the Roman Catholic Church, the Papal Nuncio, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and the Chabad Synagogue attended. Many non-Muslim

attendees commented they had never attended an iftar before. The Chargé affirmed the U.S. government's commitment to "creating bridges of understanding and respect that will bring people of all faiths together to build stronger bonds and cooperation."

On April 15, a senior embassy officer held an interfaith iftar at her residence to foster relationships with the country's Muslim laity, and local political and religious leaders. On August 17, the senior officer met with a senior official of the Apostolic Nunciature (Vatican embassy) and discussed issues that Roman Catholic faithful and clergy faced across the country.

In July, the Chargé met with religious leaders in Gondar and discussed how best to address the violence and unrest experienced in April following the burial of a Muslim cleric.

On August 28, an embassy official visited the Beta Israel, or "Hidden Jews," community in Debre Birhan, Amhara Region to demonstrate support for religious diversity and tolerance. The visit featured the opening of a Jewish community center funded by the U.S. philanthropic organization Friends of Beta Israel Debre Birhan. In remarks, the embassy official commented on the importance of grassroots organizations in breaking down barriers and effecting positive change in their communities and recognized the longstanding connection between such community organizations in the U.S. and the Beta Israel community in the country.

The U.S. government awarded several grants to faith-based organizations to fund projects that encouraged religious tolerance and peace. In February, the embassy awarded funding to the IRCE for a conference that brought together religious leaders to address conflicts. The two-day conference covered the role of religious leaders and institutions in conflict prevention and mitigation, the role of religious institutions in national dialogue, religious factors contributing to conflict in a highly religious society, and the importance of trustworthiness and the place of religious leaders and institutions in society.

In April, the embassy funded inter-religious councils in Shashamene and West Arsi zone, Oromia, to facilitate dialogue and promote peace messaging. Five districts in these zones had undergone cycles of interethnic, inter-religious, and resource-driven violence over the previous three years.

In May, the embassy funded the first of a series of workshops with the Fratello Humanitarian Organization (FHO) to deliver programs to foster a culture of intra-Oromo religious tolerance in Adama, Oromia. The first workshop was attended by religious leaders and addressed their role in fostering religious tolerance and was followed by a two-day training workshop in May. In June, the first public workshops were conducted with youth delegates to form religious relationships and featured open discussions regarding the drivers of negative perceptions of other religions. Following the workshops, the FHO communicated the outcomes to the public through social media and television news reporting.

In July, the embassy, in conjunction with the Gondar Peace and Development Council in Amhara, funded a program that culminated in a two-day workshop designed to quell lingering tensions in Gondar following inter-religious violence in April. The program consisted of three discussion forums, one among 50 activist youth, one among 50 women, and one among 50 influential persons. The forums were designed to analyze the dynamics of recent conflicts and their effects and continuing threats, and to construct a roadmap to reestablish community stabilization, reconciliation, and trust.

In September, the embassy funded a course to address conflict sensitivity, early warning, and violent conflict-mitigation mechanisms. The training included a two-day course for 160 participants from West Arsi and Shashamane town, Oromia. Local elders, religious leaders, youth, and women from Kofale and Hassa Districts attended the training. The course also provided a forum for networking.

In October, the embassy funded IRCE and several community-based organizations to facilitate five dialogues among community representatives of Adaba, Dodola, Hassasa, Kofale, Shashamane, and Shashane Zuria, in Amhara and Oromia

Regions. Also in October, the U.S. government provided funding to the EOTC Development and Interchurch Aid Commission to conduct gender-based violence programs for urban refugees in Addis Ababa.

In September and October, the embassy funded an exchange platform for inter-religious youth, in partnership with Positive Action for Development. The program engages youth living in Oromia and Amhara Regions in discussion workshops and events to share lessons learned and to recognize achievements and challenges to building positive relationships across religious groups. The cross-regional exchanges are planned to be made into a documentary film, to be aired by Amhara and Oromia regional government television and shown at public screenings across the major towns in both regions.