



## Religion

## Population

## Area

- Christians : **59.2%**
- Muslims : **34.4%**
- Ethnoreligionists : **6.3%**
- Others : **0.1%**

101,853,000

1,104,300 Km<sup>2</sup>

## Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

The constitution of Ethiopia of 1993 enshrines, in article 11, the principle of separation between the state and religion. It further adds that no religion shall be considered as official and that the state shall not interfere in religious matters nor will any religious denomination interfere in state affairs. Article 27 acknowledges the freedom of conscience and religion of all Ethiopian citizens, including the freedom, “either individually or in community with others, in public or in private, to manifest one’s religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching” (section 1). The constitution also asserts the individual’s right to disseminate their beliefs and to convert to another faith, as well as the right of parents to educate their children in the religion they practise.<sup>[1]</sup>

The preamble of the constitution expresses the conviction that the “even development of the various cultures and religions” is one of the indispensable conditions to “ensure a lasting peace, an irreversible and thriving democracy and an accelerated economic and social development for our country, Ethiopia”.

The constitution prohibits religious teaching in all schools, both public and private. Article 90, section 2, states: “Education shall be provided in a manner which is, in all respects, free from religion, [as well as] political or cultural influences.” Religious instruction is permitted in churches and mosques.

The law prohibits the formation of political parties based on religion.

Under a law introduced in February 2009 called the Charities and Societies Proclamation, all Churches and religious groups are considered “charity organisations”, and, as such, are required, in order to be recognised as a juridical body, to submit a request for registration with the Ministry of Justice. They must renew this application every three years. In the absence of such registration, they cannot engage in activities such as opening a bank account or obtaining legal

representation. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) and the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC) are exempt from this three-yearly renewal process. Churches and other agencies specialising in charitable and development work are required to register with the Charities and Societies Agency, separately from the religious body to which they belong, and are thus subject to existing legislation on NGOs. There is a limit of 10 percent on funding received from abroad.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which is the largest single religious denomination, is particularly dominant in the Tigray and Amhara regions and in some parts of Oromia. Meanwhile Sunni Muslims, who represent about a third of all Ethiopians, are dominant in the Oromia, Somali and Afar regions. Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians represent around 9 percent of the population and are most strongly concentrated in the south-west.<sup>[2]</sup>

A 2008 law makes it a criminal offence to incite hostility between religions by means of the media, as well as to engage in blasphemy and the defamation of religious leaders. Various government and civil society initiatives have sought to promote harmonious coexistence between religions and to prevent and solve conflicts related to religion. The government has created the National Interfaith Peace Council, which works with regional governments to foster religious coexistence.

The government does not grant permanent visas to foreign religious workers unless they are involved in development projects managed by registered NGOs affiliated to the Church to which they belong. This policy is not normally applied in the case of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Since the Catholic Church is considered a charity, foreign religious personnel are not allowed to retire in Ethiopia and usually continue to work beyond the age of 65. At the start of 2018, the authorities stopped renewing work permits for anyone over 65. As a consequence, there are serious concerns about the fate of 37 elderly foreign priests and religious who, in theory, have been staying illegally in the country. Although similar situations have always been solved successfully in the past, some sources in the Catholic Church have expressed uneasiness about what they see as a lack of a clear policy regarding this issue.<sup>[3]</sup>

The government officially recognises both Christian and Muslim holy days and mandates a two-hour lunch break for Muslims to go to the mosque for Friday prayer. Official holidays include: Christmas, Epiphany, Good Friday, Easter, Meskel, Eid al-Adha, the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, and Eid al-Fitr.

## Incidents

During the reporting period, no serious limitations to the right to freedom of religion were recorded. However, Islamic groups have often claimed that the government's 2009 Anti-Terrorism Proclamation (ATP) is discriminatory and interferes with their religious practice. They back their claim by citing alleged cases of harassment by security forces. Many observers within the country are inclined to think that such measures flow from state policies designed to control Islamic extremism rather than by a desire to target the practice of Islam as such.

On 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2018 several people died after clashes broke out between security forces and worshippers taking part in an Orthodox religious ceremony marking the Baptism of Jesus Christ (known as the Feast of Timket), in the town of Woldiya, 500 kilometres north of the capital Addis Ababa.<sup>[4]</sup> It was reported that during the procession scores of young people started shouting slogans against the government. According to official accounts, when soldiers opened fire, violence ensued and seven people died. Other sources stated that the death toll was much higher – up to 35. Local sources indicated that the incident had no religious connotations. Instead they suggested that it was the result of local opposition – mostly from the ethnic Ahmara population – to the government, which is perceived as being dominated by Tigrayans. Similar clashes also occurred in December 2017 in the same region but were not connected to any religious ceremony.<sup>[5]</sup>

## Prospects for freedom of religion

The situation has remained stable during the reporting period with regard to issues pertaining to religious freedom. No

incidents of particular concern have been reported. Generally, religious groups carry out their activities without major restrictions, although some minority groups have complained of what they perceive as discriminatory treatment. The detention of Islamic militants and the control the state exerts on Muslim communities seem to be motivated by legitimate security concerns rather than by a desire to curtail religious activities. This attitude of respect for religious freedom seems likely to continue, at least for the next few years.

## **| Endnotes / Sources**

[1] Ethiopian Constitution, University of Pennsylvania African Studies Center,

[http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Hornet/Ethiopian\\_Constitution.html](http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Hornet/Ethiopian_Constitution.html) (accessed 8th February 2018).

[2] G. Prunier & Elio Ficquet. *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia*. Hurst & Company. London. Nairobi 2015.

[3] Conversation on 24th January 2018 with an expatriate priest working in Ethiopia for more than 30 years.

[4] Aaron Maasho, "Weekend clashes during Ethiopia religious festival leave seven dead", 22nd January 2018,

<https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-ethiopia-violence/weekend-clashes-during-ethiopia-religious-festival-leave-seven-dead-idUKKBN1FB253> (accessed 8th February 2018).

[5] Ethiomedia, 22nd January 2018