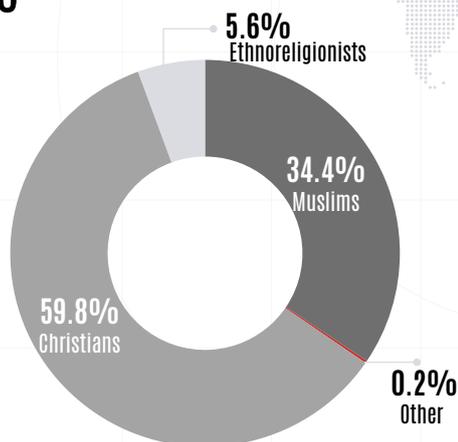




ETHIOPIA

RELIGIONS



Population

112,759,070

GDP per capita

1,730 US\$

Area

1,104,300 Km²

GINI INDEX*

35

*Economic Inequality

LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

The Constitution of Ethiopia of 1993 enshrines, in Article 11 (1 and 2), the principle of separation between state and religion. Article 11 (3) 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 (1) 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.” Article 27 (2 and 3) also asserts the right of individuals 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.¹

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 (2) states: “Education shall be conducted in a manner which is, in all respects, free from religion, [as well as] political or cultural influences.” Religious instruction is permitted by churches and mosques.²

The law prohibits the formation of political parties based on religion.³

Under a law introduced in February 2009 called the Charities and Societies Proclamation,⁴ 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 within 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.⁵

Applications to register as a religious group fall under the Directorate of Faith and Religious Affairs of the Ministry of Peace. Registering provides religious organisations a legal status that gives them the right to congregate, to obtain land to build places of worship and to build cemeteries.⁶ Religious groups must, then, provide annual reports and financial statements.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which is the largest single religious denomination (44 percent), 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 19 percent of the population and are most strongly concentrated in the south-west.⁷

A 2008 law makes it a criminal offence to incite hostility between religions by means of the media,⁸ as well as to engage in blasphemy and the defamation of religious leaders.⁹ 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,¹⁰ 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. 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.¹¹

Regarding conflict resolution according to the law, if both parties are Muslim and consent to it, they are allowed to resort to Sharia courts to resolve personal status cases.¹²

Abiy Ahmed has been the country's prime minister since April 2018; he has continuously worked towards achieving peace and international cooperation. His main efforts were directed towards resolving the border conflict with Eritrea. For that he was awarded with the Nobel Peace Prize for

2019.¹³ The new prime minister has brought a new era to the country by freeing political prisoners, inviting exiled political leaders and exiled religious scholars back to the country,¹⁴ opening access to closed television channels and media outlets, creating discussions on religious tolerance and radicalisation, and supporting the reconciliation within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church or within the Muslim community.¹⁵

The government officially recognises both Christian and Muslim observance days and mandates a two-hour lunch break for Muslims to go to the mosque for Friday prayer. Private companies are not required to apply this policy.¹⁶ Official holidays include: Christmas, Epiphany, Good Friday, Easter, Meskel, Eid al-Adha, the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, and Eid al-Fitr.¹⁷

INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

In June 2018, 20 Christians were killed in the Bale Goba area of Oromia. A local source said that it occurred after the group had opposed the plan for a monument dedicated to a Muslim leader.¹⁸

Since July 2018, about 30 churches that belong to the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church were attacked, half of them completely burned down. The NGO International Christian Concern reports that the number of cases is possibly much higher.¹⁹ In August 2018, 15 priests of the Orthodox Church were killed and 10 of their churches damaged in the eastern Somali region. Furthermore, nine churches were looted or vandalised and 30 people killed, even though local sources stated the death toll could be as high as 50.²⁰

Twenty-six years of schism in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church ended in August 2018 after the reconciliation of Patriarch Abune Merkorios and Patriarch Abune Mathias.²¹ Prime Minister Abiy played an important role in the reconciliation process. He also initiated an effort to resolve the disputes between the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC) and the Ethiopian Muslim Arbitration Committee.²²

August 2018 was also key for the Ethiopian Orthodox Diocese of Addis Ababa, when 300 of its priests were reinstated after they had been suspended in 2016 by the diocesan leadership.²³

Tensions were still reported between Protestants and Orthodox Christians. Some Muslims continued to com-

plain about the government's increasing interference in religious affairs, stating that the EIASC, which manages 40,000 mosques in the country, lacked autonomy from the government. However, Prime Minister Abiy's government has been improving the relationship with the Muslim community. Between February and May 2018, a dozen Muslim activists were released from prison. They had been arrested in 2015 following a new anti-terrorist law.²⁴

In January 2019, 34 bodies of Ethiopian Christians were found in Libya, murdered in 2015 by the Islamic State.²⁵

In February 2019, three mosques were torched in the South Gondar region. The leader of EIASC condemned the attacks and stated that such behaviour did not represent either Christians or Muslims. Previously that month, seven churches had been destroyed and torched by radical Muslims in the southern region of Halaba Kulito.²⁶

In June 2019, tensions arose regarding a request to build a Mosque in Aksum, a historical city and capital of an ancient kingdom where most residents belong to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.²⁷ The city is considered to be a sacred place for Orthodox Christians.²⁸

In August 2019, a police officer was dismissed, arrested and advised to move to another part of the country after talking with his colleagues about Christianity. He had converted from Islam two years before.²⁹

In October 2019, clashes between protestors and security forces around the capital Addis Ababa and in the Oromia region left 86 people dead. Prime Minister Abiy said that, among the dead, 40 were Christians and 36 Muslims. Leaders of the Orthodox Christian Church accused the government of not protecting its followers and Pope Francis said he was troubled by the attacks on the Orthodox Christians of Ethiopia.³⁰

There was a clash between the state and the Ethiopian Church Congregation in November 2019, with the authorities disrupting Christian gatherings, asking them to move 50 miles to the southwestern city of Gonda.³¹ After the group refused to move, the police arrested members and leaders of the congregation. Those arrested had to sign forms stating that they would never meet again in Debarok locality before they were released.

In December 2019, thousands of Ethiopian Muslims took to the streets to protest against the burning of four mosques in the Amhara region.³²

On 4th February 2020, the police attempted to demolish

a church built on a disputed plot of land the ownership of which the Ethiopian Orthodox Church claimed. Members of the church protested and tried to resist the demolition, resulting in 17 wounded and three dead.³³

Violent conflict in the northern Tigray region began in November 2020 between the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the government. During the first weeks of the conflict, hundreds were killed and thousands fled to Sudan seeking refuge. Pope Francis called for "dialogue and a peaceful resolution of discord"³⁴ and the Ethiopian bishops lamented that the tensions had escalated despite the religious leaders' efforts to lessen the conflict³⁵.

Amid the coronavirus crisis, authorities banned large gatherings, including religious services. Some religious leaders, however, kept places of worship open providing guidelines on how to worship safely.³⁶ On 15th May 2020 the Ethiopian Orthodox Church reopened all its churches taking all the appropriate security measures.³⁷

PROSPECTS FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Given the context of ethnic violence and political factionalism that has resulted in religious buildings being targeted and leaders killed, the status of religious freedom in the country has deteriorated significantly since the previous report. Religion is very important in Ethiopia, where around 98% of the population claims to have a religious affiliation.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC), which is followed by around half of the population, is not only a religious organisation but is also very closely linked to the history of the country and the identity of Ethiopians. As such, the impact that the burning of religious buildings has on the population cannot be underestimated. Whether killings and attacks on churches and mosques are the cause or a consequence of the ongoing ethnic and political tension, the net result could be an escalation of violence if nothing is done.

The deadly fighting that began in November 2020 in the Tigray region between the Tigray leadership and the central government raises concerns about the consequences on religious freedom for the population. Furthermore, Ethiopia is key to the stability of the region and a conflict could potentially endanger the situation in neighbouring countries. As the situation began to escalate, the government withdrew troops from Somalia, where they were combat-

ting the Al-Shabaab terrorist group through an African Union mission³⁸ demonstrating the negative influence of the civil violence on the wider region in the Horn of Africa.

August 2020 but rescheduled for 2021 because of the COVID-19 pandemic, will stabilise the country or worsen the situation.

It remains to be seen whether elections, originally set for

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