



# BRIEFING PAPER

# RELIGION, POLITICS AND THE STATE IN ETHIOPIA

## MARCH 2023

*This briefing paper considers key issues in the relationship between religious groups, politics and the state in Ethiopia. It provides a brief historical overview; considers the contemporary situation with a focus on the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Islam, Protestantism and traditional religions; and examines inter-religious relations between the different groups.<sup>1</sup>*

## BACKGROUND

Religious affiliation is nearly universal in Ethiopia. The vast majority of Ethiopians identify as Orthodox, Muslim, or Protestant, with a minority following so-called traditional religions. This means that religion can often provide significant political capital with respect to peacebuilding, but can also be a catalyst for conflict, in particular as religious affiliation is often closely intertwined with ethnic identities. After five decades of ostensibly secular politics, religion has made a political comeback under Abiy Ahmed. Religious rhetoric is once again part of the political discourse in defining political constituencies, demarcating differences, and articulating visions of Ethiopian unity.

The modern nation-state of Ethiopia as it emerged from the mid-nineteenth century onward has continuously wrestled with religious plurality and its political integration. In particular, the relationship between the Ethiopian Orthodox emperors and the Islamic areas under their domain gave rise to a complex history of subjection and

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1 This briefing paper summarizes a longer literature review also produced by the Peace Research Facility: 'Religion in Contemporary Ethiopia: History, politics, and inter-religious relations', Rift Valley Institute, forthcoming.

recognition, which continues to inform Christian-Muslim relations. Moreover, the Empire's expansion into the west and the south was accompanied by Protestant missions, which laid the foundations for a third main religious constituency to emerge.

Emperor Haile Selassie's reign (1930–1974) was marked by the creation of a constitutional nation state, which, on the one hand, subjected the Orthodox church to the crown, and on the other, introduced the first legal provisions for the freedom of religious practice. These were mainly aimed at harnessing the development potential of foreign missions while Ethiopian Muslims and the emergent Pentecostal movement suffered continued alienation and repression.

A revolution toppled Haile Selassie in 1974 and soon gave way to the socialist dictatorship of the Derg. Though officially atheist, the Derg could not afford to ignore religions and pursued a dual policy of co-optation and heavy-handed repression. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church lost most of its political privileges and was forcibly aligned with the new regime, while Islam for the first time received official recognition and was co-opted via the newly founded Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC). Marginal Protestants and Pentecostals were fully repressed, while larger Protestant churches attained official recognition.

In 1991, the Derg was ousted by a coalition of rebel armies, which soon espoused a new constitutional settlement of ethno-regional federalism, governed by a coalition of ethnic parties, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Religious plurality fitted well with this new valorization of cultural and ethnic diversity, and the EPRDF became the first regime to actually implement the legal guarantees to freedom of religion. In practice, though, an unevenness remained because the government continued to intervene, in particular in Islamic affairs. Protestants seem to have benefited most from the liberal religious politics of the EPRDF era and began to rise through the political ranks.

## RELIGION IN CONTEMPORARY ETHIOPIA

In 2018, Abiy Ahmed became Ethiopia's second Protestant Prime Minister, but unlike his predecessor, Abiy made religious politics central to his platform. This chimed with his aim to replace ethno-regional federalism with a more unitary vision of the nation state because religious affiliation seemed to offer an alternative set of identity politics to ethnicity. The past years have shown, however, that religious discourses have tended to amplify ethnic conflict and produce their own set of grievances.

### ETHIOPIAN ORTHODOX TEWAHEDO CHURCH (EOTC)

From the Derg regime onward, the influence of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church over national life has steadily reduced. This has combined with a decline in the numbers of Orthodox Christians in the country with many converting to competing denominations. The EOTC reacted to this competition by emphasizing its traditional

role as the ‘pillar of Ethiopian history’. Until recently, it also retained a privileged position in law as the only religious institution in the country formally endowed with a legal persona.

The post-EPRDF years have been politically difficult for the EOTC. Despite being a Pentecostal, Abiy was initially welcomed with enthusiasm by Orthodox Christians because his religious rhetoric resonated with older Orthodox myths of Ethiopian exceptionalism. At the same time, Abiy’s tenure further heightened inter-religious competition and tensions, not least because the initial loosening of state control over public religious expressions led to clashes in various places. In Orthodox quarters, there is now growing discontent over the perceived failure of the state to protect Christians of Amhara background from recurrent ethnic and religious violence.

Abiy was also widely credited with ending a split in the EOTC that had ensued in the early days of the EPRDF, even as the resulting return of the previously exiled patriarch Merkorios resulted in an uneasy power sharing arrangement between him and Abuna Mathias, who was elected patriarch in 2012. Abuna Mathias has come under attack from prominent members of the Mahibere Kidusan group – originally a student-led movement active in higher education, which has gained increasing influence among Orthodox communities at the national level. Members of the group assumed powerful positions within Abiy’s government. Some Tigrayan Orthodox Christians are particularly concerned about the appointment of renowned Mahibere Kidusan preacher Daniel Kibret as an advisor to Abiy.

The outbreak of the Tigray war in 2020 brought these internal conflicts out in the open. Abuna Mathias, himself a Tigrayan, openly used the term ‘genocide’ to denounce mass-violence against his ethnic group. Merkorios and people around him were rumoured to have registered with the government their dissent against Mathias’ statement and constructed a press silence around his interventions. Daniel Kibret, and others, have accused Abuna Mathias of partisanship during the Tigray conflict. Mahibere Kidusan itself is accused of openly supporting the claims and versions of history championed by Amhara nationalists.

The Tigray War also put other Tigrayan Orthodox clergy in a difficult position. It soon became apparent that significant sectors of the church supported the ENDF. In March 2020, the Tigrayan clergy released a statement raising the possibility of a schism. In December 2021, the International Orthodox Association of Tigray Clergy stated its support for a schism, lamenting the mistreatment of Abuna Mathias by other members of the Holy Synod, who criticized his stance on the war and contributed to his silencing and isolation. In February 2022, a new statement was made by the Tigray Orthodox Tewahido Church, noting that a local patriarchate had been established. By that time, independent Tigrayan Orthodox congregations had already formed in the diaspora. For many Tigrayans residing abroad, returning to the EOTC is not a viable possibility.

On 22 January 2023, three Orthodox Archbishops led by Abuna Sawiros announced

the constitution of a new Orthodox Synod in Oromia, and the ordination of 26 new Bishops without the consent of the Holy Synod of the EOTC. The schismatics were excommunicated on January 26 and accused of illegal ordination. Following this strong reaction, the Holy Synod called on Orthodox believers throughout the country to publicly demonstrate their support for a united church. Abuna Sawiros maintained that the split was a consequence of the fact that Oromo were under-represented in positions of powers within the EOTC and that the church did support the use of Oromo language in praying, preaching and religious teaching. These conditions, he lamented, led many Oromo Orthodox Christians to convert to other faiths. On 4 February, when a Bishop appointed by the schismatics was expected to enter the church of St. Michael in Shashamane, large crowds of Orthodox Christians loyal to the official Synod gathered in the area attempting to occupy the church. Ethiopian security forces killed at least eight people in their attempt to disperse the crowd. There were multiple reports of violence towards Ethiopian Orthodox clergy and believers in different areas of the country, which led to increasing concerns about Abiy's inaction in protecting citizens as well as accusations that he actively supported the schism.

An agreement to resolve the crisis was reached on 15 February, resulting in the reunification of the two Synods. Some have questioned whether the rapprochement was a consequence of church diplomacy or of a direct involvement of Abiy responding to Orthodox mass-mobilization. As the schismatics sought forgiveness, the Holy Synod made significant concessions, committing, for instance, to promoting the use of the Oromo language in church services and activities in Oromia, allocating more economic resources to those churches, and opening more theological colleges and training centres in which local clergy can be taught in the Oromo language. The schismatic Archbishops will be allowed to return to their original dioceses retaining their old title, while the bishops they ordained will return to their former rank, but the Holy Synod will consider confirming their promotion whenever possible.

## ISLAM

Islam is Ethiopia's second-largest religion but has remained politically marginalized for much of the country's history. Major gains in official recognition, first under the Derg and then under the EPRDF, were marred by a securitizing and interventionist approach. In the name of the so-called US-led War on Terror, the government constrained the expression of Islam and later on promoted a particular brand of Sufi Islam (al-Aḥbash) as authentic Ethiopian Islam. The Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC) was co-opted in the process and its legitimacy consequently eroded.

When Abiy Ahmed came to power in 2018 he successfully cultivated widespread support within Ethiopia's Muslim community by quickly moving away from the approach of his predecessors. This included releasing the leaders of the *Dimṣaçən Yisəma* protests – an Ethiopian Muslim movement for religious freedom – who were accused of plotting to create an Islamic state in the country. Abiy also stopped the government promotion of al-Aḥbash and supported popular demands for a reform of the EIASC. Subsequently, the government initiated and expedited legislation to

recognize the EIASC as a religious body on par with the EOTC – a long-standing demand of Ethiopian Muslims.

When early reform dialogues did not seem to progress as quickly as expected, Abiy inserted himself into the process as a mediator by appointing a committee to lead the process. While this committee made good progress on a legislative draft for the recognition of the EIASC, proposals for an organizational restructuring of the Council and negotiations on a joint theological document quickly ran into a controversy broadly defined by two factions that self-identified as ‘Sufi’ and ‘Salafi’ Muslims. In light of the prevailing divisions, some key figures among the Sufi camp even argued that the EIASC should be reserved for them and the ‘Salafis’ should establish their own council.

In May 2019, the committee with the support of a coalition of ‘Salafis’, ‘Sufis’, and outside activists organized a national conference at the Sheraton hotel in Addis Ababa. A change of leadership was effected, composed of two main structures: A Council of Ulema consisting of equal number of scholars from ‘Sufi’ and ‘Salafi’ strands; and an executive board of laymen made up of academics and organizational management professionals. They were given a transitional mandate to implement the institutional reforms necessary for an election of a more permanent leadership. The radical dissenters from the ‘Sufi’ camp staged a walk-out. A long period of stalemate followed. The government did not act until July 2022 when the approaching Eid al-Adha holiday risked open violence. Abiy suggested reconvening the Sheraton conference of May 2019 and succeeded in gathering most of the previous attendees under one umbrella, though not all prominent ‘Sufis’ attended

The Tigray War brought further divisions to bear. Following the declaration of separation by Orthodox church leaders in Tigray from the EOTC, the Tigray Regional Islamic Affairs Council had declared something to the same effect in April 2022. However, during the latest change of leadership, which included a round of votes by regional delegates, there were attempts to have Tigrayan Muslims represented. The status of Tigrayan Muslims therefore remains unresolved at present.

## **PROTESTANTISM**

The rise of Protestantism is the biggest demographic shift Ethiopia has seen in the last thirty years. In the last census, the Protestant population share stood at 18.6 per cent, which was three times more than had been recorded in 1984. The latest Demographic and Health Survey, carried out in 2016, estimate 23 per cent of 15–49 year-olds now identify as Protestants.

The regional distribution of Protestants in Ethiopia is uneven. The vast majority live in the south and west, particularly in Gambella (70.1 per cent), (the former) Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples’ Region (55.5 per cent) and the West Wellega Zone (59.5 per cent) and Guji Zone (56.1 per cent) in the Oromia region. It is also more of a rural than an urban phenomenon.



This growth of Protestantism has been marked by a nearly universal proliferation of Pentecostal spirituality. Practices like enthusiastic prayer and glossolalia (so-called ‘speaking in tongues’), prophecy, healing, and exorcism are now accommodated by all major Protestant denominations. The number of new churches and denominations has increased dramatically in recent years. The Evangelical Churches’ Fellowship of Ethiopia (ECFE) – traditionally the main umbrella organization for Protestants — has seen its membership increase from 22 to over 200 in the past fifteen years. In 2012, however, the two largest and most historic Protestant churches in Ethiopia left the ECFE over disagreements on the political representation of Protestants and a perceived centralization of development efforts.

In June 2019, Abiy Ahmed convened a meeting of over 400 Protestant leaders and promised to endow Protestantism with a legal persona if all denominations could come under one institutional umbrella. Given its historic role of representing Protestants, the ECFE initially resisted the formation of a new organization. In the end, a hybrid umbrella organization was formed in the Ethiopian Council of Gospel Believers’ Churches (ECGBC) and recognized by law as the official representation of the evangelical community. The ECGBC receives no running support from the government, yet as a brain child of Abiy it is still viewed by many as a political forum.

The unresolved tensions with the ECFE soon came to haunt the new Council in a dispute over voting arrangements. This led to the withdrawal of the ECFE from the voting assembly, followed by four of its largest member churches, the three oldest Pentecostal churches in the country as well as the (Mennonite) Meserete Kristos Church. With no negotiations at present to resolve this conflict, it would appear that Abiy’s attempt to unify Protestants has failed.

Political divisions affect all Protestant churches, whether it is in their stance toward the Council, the Tigray War, or ethnic politics. Both the Council and the ECFE issued strong calls for peace at the outset of the war. At the same time, there were loud voices in support of the war by individual Protestant preachers. These were particularly difficult for Tigrayan Protestants in Addis Ababa and the churches in Tigray, and they effectively neutralized whatever political weight the official calls to peace may have had.

## **TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS**

The share of so-called traditional religions in Ethiopia seems to be in steady decline, which correlates with the rise of Protestantism, particularly in rural areas of the south. However, traditional practices continue to inform how people practice their religion. Ethiopian Orthodoxy has had a long tradition of incorporating local spirit beliefs, and within Protestantism there has been a different emphasis of traditional spirit beliefs through the practice of exorcism. Beyond spirit beliefs there is a growing debate on the extent to which traditional value systems have enabled the rise of evangelicalism.

Ethnic nationalism is another context in which traditional religions play a significant role. The most important one here is Oromo religion, in particular with its annual

thanksgiving festival of Irreecha. This festival has attained a significant political dimension in the context of the Oromo protests, in particular with the state's brutal attack on the celebrations in 2016, which had turned into an anti-government demonstration. Pentecostals have openly preached against the ritual, but the more ethno-nationalist minded among them attended despite the official proscription of their churches. Between 2011 and 2013 a similar push against Irreecha ensued within the Orthodox Church as well, following largely the Protestant logic of characterizing it as built around so-called demonic practices. Abiy Ahmed, however, has embraced and welcomed the celebrations openly, despite the political cost among his own Pentecostal constituency, which considers them to be 'pagan'.

## INTER-RELIGIOUS RELATIONS

While in Abiy's rhetoric religions are a social capital for inter-communal peace and religious diversity – both key to building a successful nation state – a more complex scenario has unfolded with the erosion of central state authority. Inter-religious grievances have played a key role in a number of violent local confrontations, often intertwined with ethnic conflict and competition over resources. It is important, therefore, to understand the main fault lines between Ethiopia's largest religious groups.

### MUSLIM – ORTHODOX

There are two mutually reinforcing narratives of Orthodox-Muslim relations in Ethiopia: 1) The country is cast as a unique place of peaceful inter-religious relations; and 2) instances of Christian-Muslim conflict are explained as recent erosions of the peaceful fabric under the influence of extremist ideologies. Among Muslims, a third narrative has emerged in recent years that casts the country's past religious peace as an achievement at the expense of Ethiopian Muslims and their nationalities.

References to an Ethiopian tradition of peaceful religious co-existence often focus on Wollo province, a centre of Sufi Islam and Islamic learning, which due to its proximity to the old centres of the Ethiopian Christian empires has a long history of Christian-Muslim engagement. More recently, there has been a shift in the perception of Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia, driven to a large part by the securitization of Islam (in the context of Ethiopia's invasion in Somalia); a rise in Christian-Muslim conflict (concerning both Orthodox and evangelical Christians); and studies about Islamic reform movements. The 2006 clashes between Muslims and (predominantly Orthodox) Christians in the Jima zone attracted particular attention by the political system. Abiy Ahmed built his early political career on reconciling and researching this conflict.

In recent years, tensions have developed over an increasing visual and auditory presence of Muslims and the effects of social media. A competition over public space is amplified by the now ubiquitous loudspeakers broadcasting religious ceremonies in the vicinity of mosque and churches. Facebook and other social media immediately



connected local contexts to Christian-Muslim conflict elsewhere, for example in the circulation of shocking footage of the beheading of Orthodox Christians by ISIS in Libya in 2015.

Recent studies have shown the importance of local factors in the development of Christian-Muslim relations, in particular in urban settings with increasing religious plurality. The long history of Orthodox-Muslim relations in Ethiopia has given rise to conflictual relations as well as to ameliorating social capital, so that the study of local political dynamics is necessary to understand how inter-religious relations can morph into open conflict.

### **PROTESTANT - MUSLIM**

Historically, Muslims have tended to focus their inter-religious attention on the EOTC, given its traditional predominance in the country. However, there is now an increasing unease with what is perceived as a violation of state secularism in favour of Protestants. Protestant missionaries, meanwhile, have preoccupied themselves with Islam from the first missionary endeavours onward, often understanding their work as an effort to contain the spread of Islam among the Oromo.

In the late 1950s, the Islam in Africa Project (IAP) was formed with the intention of aiding Protestant churches in conducting missions among Muslims while avoiding polemics and increasing neighbourly virtues in Christian-Muslim encounters. IAP entered Ethiopia in the late 1960s and pursued this largely non-confrontational, missional approach. This has not eliminated more competitive encounters, however. The rise of more rigorous religious movements on both sides – Pentecostal Protestantism and Islamic reform – have sparked occasional Protestant-Muslim polemics but so far without prompting open violence. There was also a muchless covered missionary initiative toward Islam spearheaded by Pentecostals and Charismatic Lutherans, which sought to create ‘Muslims for Jesus’ – that is Christian converts that stay within their respective Islamic communities.

### **ORTHODOX - PROTESTANT**

Early Protestant missionaries saw their work in evangelism, Bible distribution and theological dialogue as a contribution to Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity; yet as their efforts intensified, it became clear that a Protestant-Orthodox partnership would be fraught with irreconcilable differences and political dangers. Ethiopian Pentecostals later followed a similar trajectory. Many of the early Pentecostals initially aimed to revive their churches of origin, whether Orthodox or mainline Protestant. As their efforts were not welcome, they decided to form a national association and subsequently endured persecution and hardened denominational boundaries. Therefore, even as the Orthodox Church also encountered political pressure during the years of the Derg, an intra-Christian alliance never formed.

As Charismatic forms became ubiquitous among Protestants in the EPRDF era, the divide between Protestants and the EOTC deepened. This was fuelled by the significant growth of Protestantism at the expense of the Orthodox Church,



including in regions that remained predominantly Orthodox. In this environment of religious change, Orthodox Christians increasingly activated longstanding tropes of Protestants as being foreign, heretics, and ‘enemies of Mary’. Evangelicals tend to portray themselves as the true believers and attack the Orthodox Church as authoritarian and lacking true salvation. The Protestant-Orthodox divide is often demarcated as sharply as the Muslim-Christian boundary.

In recent years, movements within the EOTC have adapted more specifically to the challenge of Protestantism. The foremost among these is the Mahibere Kidusan (see above). It has sought to defend the Orthodox Church as the only legitimate expression of Christianity in Ethiopia and regularly targets Pentecostalism as well as Orthodox Charismatics in its publications. Another Orthodox reaction has been to spiritualize the Pentecostal challenge through exorcising ‘new religion’ from believers, drawing on the church’s long-standing tradition of spirit management. There is also a small Charismatic renewal movement (Tehadiso) within the EOTC, which seeks to incorporate Pentecostal practices with Orthodox theology but often comes under pressure within the church due to the strong Orthodox-Protestant divide.

## **DIALOGUE INITIATIVES AND RESEARCH**

The politically most important organization for managing inter-religious relations is the Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia (IRCE). It was founded by the Ethiopian government in 2010 to address a perceived increase of religious extremism and political mobilization of religions. The IRCE is organized nationwide in parallel to government structures from the national level down to kebeles and is funded by the public purse. Its membership consists of the main umbrella organizations for all of Ethiopia’s main religions. The Council seeks to facilitate national and local encounters between religious leaders and has produced an inter-religious training manual. Its official character and past instrumentalization in the government’s fight against so-called extremism has, however, limited the IRCE’s popular appeal and effectiveness.

In addition, there are a number of civil society organizations that are engaged in inter-religious dialogue initiatives. These range from post-conflict peacebuilding initiatives to inter-religious charitable works, as well as research activities. The restrictive civil society organization (CSO) law that was in place from 2009 to 2019 has severely limited some of these activities. Due to the absence of religious studies departments at Ethiopia’s universities, there is a lack of academic research and knowledge exchange on religion and society that is not affiliated with any particular religion.



## CONCLUSION

Religion is of considerable historical, social, and political significance in Ethiopia. It is interwoven with historical narratives, inherited political imbalances, claims to public space, ethnic identities, and articulated visions about Ethiopia's future. Ethiopia's political system has always laboured to harness, mobilize and control the country's religious plurality and particular faith constituencies. Abiy's invocation of faith in his project of reconstituting the Ethiopian nation state on a post-ethnic formula must be read in this broader history to avoid serious misunderstandings.

Significant demographic shifts and more liberal policy in access to land for religious buildings and burial grounds have exacerbated competition over public space and claims to historical predominance can find themselves challenged by these changes. In addition, the major religions are not homogenous entities and are often engaged in internal discussions over how to align their politics and react to other religious groups. The standard narrative of peaceful coexistence being confronted by rising extremism is not particularly helpful in our understanding of interactions between different religious groups today.



## ABOUT THE PRF

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