

# RELIGION AND THE 2018/2019 CONFLICT IN HAWASSA

AFEWORK HAILU



**Rift Valley Institute**  
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### THE ETHIOPIA PEACE RESEARCH FACILITY

This report was written for the Ethiopia Peace Research Facility (PRF). The PRF is an independent facility combining timely analysis on peace and conflict from Ethiopian experts with support for conflict sensitive programming in the country. It is managed by the Rift Valley Institute and funded by the UK government.

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**COVER DESIGN:** Designed by Maggie Dougherty.

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# ABBREVIATIONS

|              |   |
|--------------|---|
| <b>CSA</b>   | Central Statistics Agency                           |
| <b>ECFE</b>  | Evangelical Churches Fellowship of Ethiopia         |
| <b>EECMY</b> | Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus           |
| <b>EGBC</b>  | Ethiopian Gospel Believers Council                  |
| <b>EKHC</b>  | Ethiopian Kale Heywet Church                        |
| <b>EOTC</b>  | Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church                  |
| <b>EPRDF</b> | Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front   |
| <b>IRC</b>   | Inter-Religious Council                             |
| <b>SNNPR</b> | Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region |
| <b>TPLF</b>  | Tigray People's Liberation Front                    |

# MAP: ETHIOPIA'S SOUTHERN REGIONS



## SUMMARY

- In June 2018 and July 2019 violent clashes erupted in Hawassa, an important commercial hub in southern Ethiopia and the capital of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region. While the first attack appeared relatively spontaneous, the second was apparently well planned, with allegations that Sidama youth, known as *Ejeto*, received direction from Sidama politicians.
- For a half a century prior to the clashes, Hawassa city was regarded as peaceful and accommodating, its ethnic and religious diversity well known. The city is predominantly Protestant, with a sizeable Orthodox minority and smaller Muslim and Catholic populations. There has also been a noticeable increase in those practising Sidama traditional religion. In contrast to contemporaneous conflicts elsewhere in Ethiopia that appeared to run predominantly along inter-religious fault-lines, the clashes in Hawassa arose from Sidama nationalism and the political battle for a referendum on establishing a Sidama Regional State. Thus, co-religionists, in particular Protestants, attacked one another based on ethnic difference.
- Even so, religion was closely involved in the clashes as several churches became forums for ethnic division and some Christians actively supported the conflict. At the same time, a number of religious leaders and institutions such as Hawassa's Inter-Religious Council were engaged in peaceful interventions, both during and after the conflicts.
- The 2018/2019 conflicts have drastically reshaped Hawassa city's inter- and intra-religious relations. Previously influential community leaders have lost their relevance, their reputations tarnished due to their perceived involvement in the conflicts. As a result, new Protestant leaders are entering the spotlight, mainly due to their peacekeeping and reconciliation activities during and after the conflicts.
- While the current situation remains fraught with difficulties, if current peacebuilding initiatives can be extended and maintained over time, with appropriate local and external support, this raises the prospect of religious communities being transformed from political platforms in conflict to important agents for peace and development.

# INTRODUCTION

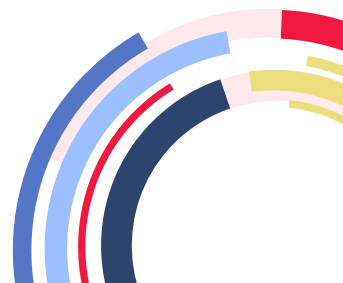
In June 2018 and July 2019 violent clashes erupted in Hawassa, an important commercial hub in southern Ethiopia and the capital of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region (SNNPR). In both cases, it took several days to restore calm, with numerous casualties reported, some of them of shocking brutality.

The clashes took place amid a wider context of Sidama ethno-political activists demanding a referendum on the cessation of Sidama Regional State from SNNPR, with Hawassa as its capital. Accordingly, the clashes were marked by Sidama violence inflicted on other ethnic groups, in particular the Wolayta, though many Sidama also lost their lives. The Hawassa riots are therefore primarily regarded as an inter-ethnic conflict. Nonetheless, as this report will establish and unpick, religious communities played a substantial role in the clashes: in some cases mobilizing people for conflict and in others providing shelter. Moreover, many religious leaders have acknowledged they should have done more to prevent their communities from engaging in violence.

Section 1 gives an overview of Hawassa's history and demographic composition, providing context for the emergence of the ethnic and religious fault-lines that would later fuel the clashes. Following this, section 2 details the 2018 and 2019 conflicts, in particular dissecting the role played by religious leaders and institutions in fuelling violence. Section 3 switches the focus to the role played by religions in peacebuilding initiatives during and after the conflicts, before the conclusion offers some key takeaways on what might be learnt going forward.

## METHODOLOGY

This report is based on 15 days of fieldwork conducted in Hawassa in October and November 2022, during which 25 individuals were interviewed. Study participants came from various ethnic groups (Sidama, Wolayta, Kambata and Amhara) and all the main religious denominations present in Hawassa. They included religious leaders, as well as ordinary citizens from various age groups and occupations.





# BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

## HAWASSA: DEMOGRAPHY AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC POLITICAL SITUATION

Located 273 km south of the capital Addis Ababa and situated within the greater Rift Valley, Hawassa emerged as a town in the 1950s, having previously been no more than a small rural village on the shores of Lake Hawassa. In the decades since, Hawassa has emerged as a ‘city that characterises the on-going rapid urbanisation and urban growth of Ethiopian secondary cities’.<sup>1</sup>

The turning point for Hawassa’s rapid growth came in 1959, coinciding with a visit from the region’s governor, Ras Mengesha Seyoum, who was planning to move his capital there from Yirgalem.<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, the town received significant attention from the then emperor, Haile Selassie I, who even built one of his palace-residences—later known as Loqe Palace—in the area. This in turn led to Hawassa attracting an increasing number of residents and soon it was considered a prime tourist destination, particularly for residents of Addis Ababa and towns in the surrounding Oromia region. Hotel owners and entrepreneurs quickly moved in to take advantage of this interest, shaping the town’s future development.<sup>3</sup>

Despite being fairly new compared to some of Ethiopia’s other important towns, Hawassa was made the capital of Sidamo Province (Kifle Hager) from 1978 to 1995. At this point, with the adoption of the 1995 constitution, it became the capital of SNNPR and, since June 2020, has also served as the capital of newly-formed Sidama Regional State. The formation of Sidama Regional State means Hawassa is now technically outside SNNPR, with plans underway to move the latter’s capital to a different location. These plans have, however, been complicated by further discussions and referenda on new regional states to be formed out of the remainder of SNNPR.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, Hawassa remains the undisputed hub of the region. It is home to many colleges and a state-owned-university attended by Ethiopians from various parts of the country. This, alongside the various socio-political changes that have taken place in each phase of the city’s

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1 Kinfu Eshetayeh et. al., ‘The Genesis of Per-Urban Ethiopia: The Case of Hawassa city’, *Journal of Land and Rural Studies* 7 (2019): 77.

2 Mariam, ‘A History’, 20–21.

3 The four phases of Hawassa’s development mentioned by Kinfu et al. are 1960–95, 1995–2003, 2003–5 and 2005–11 (Kinfu et al., ‘The Genesis’, 79–82). A further important phase, 2011–2020, has been key in determining the fate of Hawassa as we know it today. The issues discussed in this report mainly relate to this ‘fifth’ phase.

4 Chachalew Tadesse, ‘Referendum in Ethiopia’s Southern Region’, Briefing Paper, Rift Valley Institute, March 2023, <https://riftvalley.net/publication/referendum-ethiopias-southern-region>.

history, has had a lasting impact on Hawassa's demography, resulting in a uniquely diverse urban population.

## HAWASSA AND ITS RELIGIOUS GROUPS

Hawassa is a vibrant city that has experienced constant but steady demographic change. Almost from the beginning of its establishment, Hawassa accommodated arrivals from different parts of the nation, who brought with them different religious expressions. According to the 2007 census conducted by Ethiopia's Central Statistics Agency (CSA), Hawassa had a total population of 258,808,<sup>5</sup> with the CSA projection for 2021 being 436,992.<sup>6</sup>

The city is predominantly Protestant, with a sizeable Orthodox minority and smaller Muslim and Catholic populations. According to the 2007 census, this broke down as 59.7 per cent of the population identifying as Protestant; 27 per cent as Ethiopian Orthodox; 8.1 per cent as Muslim; and 3.8 per cent as Catholic.<sup>7</sup> Only 376 individuals (0.14 per cent) identified as practising 'traditional religion'. These numbers on the smallest religious populations are, however, somewhat misleading. The Catholic population is actually quite sizeable compared to much of Ethiopia, and there has been a noticeable increase in those practising Sidama traditional religion, which may not be reflected when census respondents are asked to state their primary religious affiliation.

While the majority of Protestant churches (which have their historic roots among the Wolayta and Kambata ethnic groups) are located in larger areas closer to the shores of Lake Hawassa, the centre of the city is mainly occupied by Orthodox and Muslim communities. This arrangement has its origin in the town's early development under Haile Selassie. The imperial government awarded land to retire on to about 400 middle-aged soldiers who had served in the fight against the Italian occupation from 1935 to 1941. Their settlement, with its vibrant trade and residential neighbourhoods, became the centre of the new town. The fact that new settlers mainly came from Tigray, Amhara, Addis Ababa and Wollo is likely one of the factors behind the growth of Hawassa's Orthodox and Muslim populations.

Study participants related that many of the Sidama, who are majority Protestants, live and work in the city's 'central area' and eastern parts. They also claimed that, historically, Hawassa's growth and increasing religious diversity did not generate tensions, even when non-Protestant religious groups later came to occupy key areas of the city.

From the 1990s, and then even more rapidly after 2005, Hawassa's residential patterns began to diversify. Following the establishment of SNNPR and the choice of Hawassa as its capital,

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5 Ethiopian Statistical Authority, 'Summary and Statistical Report of the 2007 Population and Housing Census: Population Size by Age and Sex', Addis Ababa, Population Census Commission, 2008, 80.

6 Hawassa City Administration, 'People'. Accessed 14 April 2023, [www.hawassa.gov.et/en/city/people](http://www.hawassa.gov.et/en/city/people).

7 Ethiopian Statistical Authority, 'Summary and Statistical Report'.

many Wolayta and Gammo (a significant number of whom are Orthodox), as well as Muslim Gurage and Siltes, settled in the city's market areas and centre. Thus, Hawassa became a 'mini-metropolis' and, in economic, social and political terms, one of Ethiopia's cosmopolitan centres. This became evident in the 2005 election, when the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)'s landslide victory was challenged in urban areas like Hawassa. As one study highlights, after the defeat:

the ruling party decided to overwhelm the urban centres, which are heterogeneously populated, with the original inhabitant ethnic community by bringing the nearby rural kebeles into the city's jurisdiction. As a result, 12 former rural kebeles were reclassified as part of Hawassa city administration. The annexation resulted in the addition of 137,812 peoples and 12 kebeles: 11 rural (total population 136,586) and one urban (total population 1,126). It was a political response to urban voters ... under the pretext of urban growth.<sup>8</sup>

This fundamentally changed the ethnic composition of Hawassa City Administration Zone. The 2007 census lists a narrow majority of Amhara for urban areas (24.5 per cent), followed by the Wolayta (22.4 per cent), Sidama (18.1 per cent), Oromo (8.4 per cent) and Gurage (7.1 per cent). If both the rural and urban areas of the enlarged Hawassa Zone are considered, however, a very different picture emerges. Here, the Sidama are close to an absolute majority (48.6 per cent), ahead by some distance of the Wolayta (22.7 per cent), Amhara (15.4 per cent), Oromo (5.2 per cent) and Gurage (4.3 per cent). This is, of course, due to the near homogeneous Sidama composition of the newly incorporated rural areas. As such, the administrative change has served to underscore Sidama claims on Hawassa city, despite the latter being much more multi-ethnic.

Since the census, the inflow of Sidama into Hawassa has only increased, with people from the surrounding countryside arriving in the city in search of economic opportunities and a better life.<sup>9</sup> This demographic change was confirmed by the study participants. In terms of religion, this population flow has resulted in a marked increase in the visibility and impact of Protestantism, which has been strongly felt by Hawassa's other religious groups. As one informant put it, 'For Evangelicals Hawassa is Ethiopia's Jerusalem'.<sup>10</sup>

## PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE IN HAWASSA PRE-2018?

For a half a century, Hawassa city was regarded as peaceful and accommodating, its ethnic and religious diversity well known. Participants reported that until 2018 there was no record of serious inter-communal clashes involving religion. As such, a memory of 'those peaceful days'

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8 Kinfu et al., 'The Genesis', 78–9. 'The data shows that nearly 32 per cent of the residents settled between 2004 and 2010 ... and 60 per cent of the residents have settled since 2011'. See Kinfu et al., 'The Genesis', 82.

9 Kinfu et al., 'The Genesis', 86.

10 Interview IRC member #1, Protestant.

still lingers in the minds of some interviewees,<sup>11</sup> with one claiming, ‘Hawassa is considered as one of the favourable cities in Ethiopia in terms of religious coexistence’, and that there was a state of ‘peaceful interaction between Protestants, Orthodox and followers of traditional religion’. The informant added that, ‘there has never been a clash instigated due to religion’.<sup>12</sup> Another resident described the city as a place where various religious and ethnic groups engage in close relations, and that compared to other Ethiopian urban centres:

Freedom exists at a larger scale. It is currently serving as a seat of two regional states, both functioning in harmony. In terms of religious plurality, all kinds of religions exist in the city. Even though there are numerous religious groups in town, there is no magnified clash ever exhibited.<sup>13</sup>

This idea that Hawassa is one of the most peaceful cities in Ethiopia was widely shared among informants, with one long-term resident attesting, ‘I know, we all know, that it was peaceful town in the country’.<sup>14</sup>

These idealized discourses about the past should not, however, be taken to mean there were no prior issues concerning religion. While they may not have erupted as strongly as in 2018 and 2019, tensions related to ‘a claim for sole ownership’ of the city did already exist. As Hawassa increasingly attracted the attention of non-Sidama southerners, including considerable numbers of Wolayta, the Sidama and Wolayta began to view each other with suspicion. The hold the Sidama majority had on the city left others uneasy, while conversely, the inflow of Wolayta migrants likely played into the political mobilization of the Sidama against them.

Several participants expressed sentiments along these lines, indicating the 2018 clashes were not simply due to the actions of politicians and activists, but were built on existing grievances about ‘ownership’ of the city. One informant observed that:

The Wolayta were the targets by the time [of the clashes], but actually they were hated even before that. There is a hidden claim from the Wolayta that Hawassa belongs to them. They are dominant in the centre of the city, covering places from the Cultural Hall to the lake side to that of Dayu. They need land, and there is land scarcity in Wolayta, as we know. On 5th Sene [12 June 2018] the anger reached its climax, and the mob started to attack Wolaytas in the afternoon.<sup>15</sup>

This participant also noted that many powerful political positions in Hawassa were then

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11 Interview with *liqe-lisanat* (arch-preacher), Orthodox.

12 Interview with reverend #2, Protestant.

13 Interview with IRC member #2, Protestant.

14 Interview with pastor #3, Protestant.

15 Interview with pastor #6, Protestant.

occupied by members of the Wolayta, and asserted that together with the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) they worked to repress the question of Sidama statehood for as long as the EPRDF was in power.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, he asserted that many prominent pastors, both in local media and leadership positions, were Wolayta. It should be noted that this same informant would go on to shield a Wolayta against Sidama attacks during the conflict, even as he accused the same person of speaking 'bad things about the Sidama' before the conflicts. As such, these sentiments regarding long-standing tensions were likely not an expression of a radical political agenda, but reflective of the city's wider political climate in the build-up to the clashes.

Hawassa has also seen tensions in the past related to religion. From the formation of the town onward, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church (EOTC) established itself as the dominant faith. This dominance was further enhanced under the Derg regime (1974–1987), which tolerated the EOTC, whereas the Protestants were persecuted and had their churches shut down. When nationwide religious freedom was ensured in the 1990s, the re-emergence of Protestantism in Hawassa provoked conflict.<sup>17</sup> One informant gave the following account of these tensions:

I was born and raised in Hawassa. There were sporadic clashes in Hawassa; the one which we all remember well was when Reinhard Bonnke [a German Pentecostal evangelist] came to Hawassa. It was in 1990s. The EOTC strongly opposed his ministry. We used to hear that Protestants are dominant in Hawassa, but that fierce opposition to the evangelist sent a signal that Orthodox is the actual dominant in the city. They used the authority of government officials. They mobilized politicians, and tried to resist. The EOTC was coercive in relation to others and I can personally tell from my own experience. I was attacked by the members of that church.<sup>18</sup>

While numerically Protestants form the majority, there was certainly a sense among several informants that the EOTC exerted greater influence over the city's socio-political and cultural life, at least until 2018.<sup>19</sup> One participant recounted:

We know that EOTC is influential politically, and there were times when the church acted decisively in who should assume political power and who shouldn't. Those whom the church supported would easily assume power, and those who weren't supported by the church would be demoted. They had power in the election of the previous mayors. And I

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16 Prior to 2018, many of the important church leadership and senior SNNPR official positions were occupied by members of the Wolayta. Moreover, Wolayta dominance over parts of Hawassa city was mentioned by some Sidama as provoking concern.

17 Interviews with elder #1, Protestant; and pastor #2, Protestant.

18 Interview with pastor #2, Protestant.

19 This was asserted by a number of Protestant informants, despite a recognition that nowadays Protestants have become more influential economically and politically (Interview with IRC member #1, Protestant; and pastor #6, Protestant), or that Protestant influence began earlier than 2018 (Interview with reverend #2, Protestant).

think that would be a possibility in the future as well. The important city locations they have occupied would tell you this clearly. They own lands in prestigious and important key locations in town.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to Protestant–Orthodox competition, intra-Protestant divisions have significantly shaped politics in Hawassa. While informants stressed the strong spirit of brotherhood among Hawassa’s Protestants in times past,<sup>21</sup> many also highlighted the existence of divisions and tensions, usually involving competition over leadership. It is this that has led Protestant churches to divide along ethnic lines—something that became very visible in the post-2018 conflicts. The ethnic orientation of some churches can be traced back to the time of their establishment, with different missions dividing the area up among themselves. While such alignments between ethnic group and denomination mattered little as long as Protestants were an oppressed minority, the dominance of ethnic politics coupled with relative religious freedom since 1991 seems to have brought these divisions to the fore.

Building on all of the above, the 2018/2019 conflicts have drastically reshaped Hawassa city’s inter- and intra-religious situation. The ethnic political movement seeking Sidama statehood mobilized Sidama in all relevant religious groups (Protestants, Catholic and Orthodox). In many cases, this has meant a rise in intra-religious tensions.

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20 Interview with pastor #6, Protestant.

21 Interview with elder #1, Protestant.

# THE CONFLICTS OF 2018 AND 2019

The perception of Hawassa as a relatively peaceful city in which different religions and ethnic groups coexisted peacefully was significantly disrupted by the violent clashes of 13–14 June 2018, and a second confrontation that took place on 18 July 2019.<sup>22</sup> Locally, these clashes are generally known as ‘the clashes of 2010’ and the ‘11/11/11 clashes’, as per their dates in the Ethiopian calendar.<sup>23</sup>

Both clashes coincided with Sidama New Year (known as *cämbälala*) which is celebrated on an auspicious day chosen by traditional healers and leaders following a process of astrological divination (*kokeb bämäqwäṣär*, literally ‘by counting stars’), as well as divination based on the reading of animal entrails (*mora bämänmäb*). This procedure and the calendar it refers to make *cämbälala* particularly relevant for Sidama culture and tradition. Informants reported that after the 2018 celebrations, anti-government protests ‘spontaneously’ emerged, followed by attacks on Wolayta.<sup>24</sup> The clashes during the 2019 celebrations, by contrast, were characterized as being highly politicized and arising from systematic preparation, with attacks not only on Wolayta but other non-Sidamas.<sup>25</sup>

Reflecting on the initial 2018 clashes, one informant claimed that violence flared a day after the *cämbälala* celebration, following a rumour that a Sidama has been killed by a Wolayta:

In the evening of 12 June, the President of the SNNPR gave a news release thanking everybody for holding a peaceful celebration of 2018. However, on the next day early in the morning, we heard about the killing of a Sidama, who was a student of the Teachers Training College in Hawassa. The rumour was that he was attacked by a Wolayta. The news spread to the surrounding areas ... Then on the 14 June, many Sidama of surrounding towns and villages entered Hawassa and started to attack Wolayta residents of Hawassa. Their properties burnt, and the report was that 15 Wolaytans were killed. As retaliation to this, Wolaytans killed six Sidama, and another six died by police force.<sup>26</sup>

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22 The Sidama New Year for 2018 took place on 12 June, with clashes beginning the following day.

23 The 11/11/11 clashes actually continued for more than a week, with attacks on government buildings and disruptions to Orthodox St. Gabriel festivities occurring on 26 July (interview with pastor #4, Protestant).

24 Interviews with pastor #4, Protestant; pastor #6, Protestant; and theologian/pastor, Protestant.

25 The targets were mainly Gurage (including Silte) and the Amhara.

26 Interview with elder #2, Protestant.

The human and economic toll of the 2019 conflict in particular was tremendous: more than 30 people on both sides were killed and many more wounded, with some even burnt on stakes.<sup>27</sup> After some controversial political negotiations, the government finally gave permission for a referendum to be held, leading to the establishment of Sidama Regional State in July 2020.

The clashes profoundly changed Hawassa's socio-political and religious landscape. Most study participants remembered events in some detail, with some having witnessed scenes firsthand.<sup>28</sup> Nonetheless, there were indications that their stories had been shaped by the collective memories of their respective groups, with subjective perceptions prioritized over historical accuracy. Some informants struggled to produce a coherent narrative, conflated different events or confused the chronological order of the clashes. Nonetheless, two broad trends emerged: first, informants generally agreed that the root cause of the conflicts was ethnic politics and, second, they narrated how religious groups were mobilized by politicians.<sup>29</sup>

The primary context in both 2018 and 2019 was the push for a referendum on establishing a Sidama Regional State. To this end, political elites successfully engaged religious communities, which in the case of the Sidama involved mostly traditional religions and Protestant churches. Some informants also disclosed that Sidama Catholic youths and a few Muslim Sidamas participated in the clashes. Thus, the main driver of the Hawassa conflicts appears to be the political mobilization of religious constituents in the service of an ethno-nationalist struggle for autonomy. This struggle is rooted in the Sidama National Front's long-running attempts to gain self-rule, which first emerged in the 1970s.<sup>30</sup> Yet, as the study's participants made clear, there remains conflicting opinions as to what exactly the implications of this dynamic are, and how exactly ethnocentrism, political involvement and religious dynamics shaped the 2018/2019 clashes.

## ETHNICITY AND POLITICAL GRIEVANCES

Most Sidama, including traditional leaders and many church leaders, considered the attainment of statehood (*kilil*) to be 'a long overdue question'. This aspiration was not merely fuelled by Sidama nationalism but gained popular appeal due to the failures of the Ethiopian federal system and problems in the democratization process. Accordingly, many informants claimed that the conflicts, although well mobilized and manipulated by Sidama political activism, were an expression of long-term grievances. Sidama study participants asserted that the government's

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27 The casualty numbers commonly given are 15 deaths on the Wolayta side and 15 deaths on the Sidama side. In addition, attacks on the EOTC, which involved the burning of five church buildings, claimed the life of an elderly church member (Interview with reverend #1, Protestant). Official data from the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission or similar organizations was unavailable to the researchers.

28 In fact, none the religious leaders interviewed claimed to be outside the city at the time.

29 Informants agreed that the attack was part of a strategy employed by political elites, who, it is claimed, provided logistical support to transport youths from one area to attack other areas.

30 Interview with pastor #6, Protestant.



appointment of Shiferaw Shigute (a Wolayta Protestant) and other government officials from the southern region was intended to undermine the quest for Sidama statehood. Such activities were usually presented as a conspiracy or scheme enacted by the EPRDF and then Prosperity Party governments to suppress Sidama political engagement.<sup>31</sup>

This self-perception of essentially peaceful Sidama driven by political oppression to violently express their dissent did not accord with the perspectives of other study participants. Here, accusations of ‘racism’ or ethnic exclusivism prevailed, the claim being that, when it came to appointing people to church leadership or political office, the foremost concern was protecting one’s own ethnic group. As one informant from a large Protestant church observed:

In local leadership, when we nominate our elders, people still want to know who is from which ethnicity, and want to do some math and get proportional representation. I tell you that there are people who are caught under the spirit of racism and the spirit of politics.<sup>32</sup>

Another informant noted how various Protestant churches are known to be dominated by a particular ethnic group, and asserted that ‘if we did not live by clan and race’ the country would be in a better situation.<sup>33</sup> This view was not, however, universally shared, with some informants taking pains to exempt their own religious community from these ethnic divisions. Nonetheless, there was a shared awareness of ethnic separatism being an underlying problem in the city.

The 2018/2019 clashes were undoubtedly driven by ethnic profiling. In both cases, the primary targets were Wolayta, though in 2019 Amhara and Gurage were attacked alongside them. While the first attack appeared relatively spontaneous, the second was apparently well planned. Almost every informant agreed that in 2019 the Sidama youth, known as *Ejeto*, were organized, violent and received direction from Sidama politicians. The wider attacks on Amhara and several southern ethnicities (Wolayta, Silte and Gurage) bore the hallmarks of a systematic push against all groups that might stand in the way of Sidama statehood.

The study participants were not, however, unanimous in ascribing the clashes to generalized ethnic divisions. Some insisted the attacks resulted from the ethnic identity of particular government officials being conflated with their entire group, thereby transforming political anxieties into wider ethnic conflict.<sup>34</sup> For example, in targeting Shiferaw Shigute, who is from Wolayta, attackers turned on the Wolayta; and in targeting the politician Muferiat Kamil (who is Muslim and Silte), ‘they attacked the Silte, who obviously are Muslims, but also made a mistake

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31 Interview with civil servant, Protestant.

32 Interview with pastor #1, Protestant.

33 Interview with pastor #3, Protestant.

34 As one informant observed, ‘There also seems a hidden “internal tension” between some government officials [i.e. between the Sidama and non-Sidama politicians]’ (Interview with pastor #6, Protestant).

in confusing Silte with Gurage'.<sup>35</sup> Some saw a Wolayta–TPLF alliance as the main underlying cause for the clashes:

In the past, many people have suffered for a long time and paid the ultimate price to get this question answered. The TPLF refused to comply. There are influential SNNPR government officials like Shiferaw Shigute who is originally from Wolayta, who did what they could to suppress the political question. They managed to have the TPLF on their side.<sup>36</sup>

It is worth noting, however, that the same informant also presented a conspiracy theory about the attacks, claiming that some of the attacking youth did not 'look like Sidama', and suggesting they may have been TPLF agents or 'street children' utilized by political actors in some kind of false flag operation.<sup>37</sup>

Another participant claimed that during the 2019 clashes the anger of the Sidama crowd was whipped up by rumours that Amhara politicians had come to Hawassa and Yirgalem to shore up support against a Sidama statehood referendum. This led to attacks on ethnic Amharas and the EOTC,<sup>38</sup> which tend to be conflated in contemporary *neftegna* ('settler') narratives about Ethiopia. These narratives construe the making of modern Ethiopia from the nineteenth century onwards as a form of settler-colonialism driven by Orthodox Amhara expansion and feudal land ownership. Similarly, another informant claimed 'there was an assumption among the public that a particular ethnic group [Amhara] did not want the Sidama to establish their regional state, and thus they attacked Orthodox churches since there was a trend of identifying the church as the religion of the Amhara'.<sup>39</sup>

It would appear, therefore, that two competing narratives about the ethno-political dimension of the clashes persist in Hawassa. While some regard the conflicts as symptoms of an ethnocentrism or even racism, others—mostly Sidama nationalists—are keen to impose a more political reading, pointing to the long-repressed demand for Sidama statehood as the primary cause.

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35 Interview with reverend #1, Protestant. The same argument is held to explain the attack against Wolayta and Amhara.

36 Interview with pastor #6, Protestant.

37 Interview with pastor #6, Protestant. There is a common claim that the TPLF tried to divide the people not only along ethnic but religious lines, particularly Muslims (introducing a sect known as Ahbash; interview with *haji* (Hawassa City Islamic Affairs), Muslim).

38 Interview with reverend #1, Protestant.

39 Interview with IRC member #2, Protestant.

## THE POLITICAL MOBILIZATION OF RELIGION

While the primary cause of the Hawassa clashes undoubtedly lay in ethnic nationalism and the politics of pushing for a Sidama statehood referendum, this does not mean ethnicity was the only dimension involved. In fact, religious actors and beliefs were mobilized throughout the conflicts, leading to a somewhat fluid demarcation between religious and ethnic identity.

Sidama traditional religion is a prominent subject for discussion here. Some informants claimed that Sidama political elites sought to involve Sidama traditional leaders in order to take advantage of the respect they are accorded and the fact they would be listened to by the people. Although such a direct, planned co-optation of Sidama traditional religion for a political cause is difficult to prove, it is evident that Sidama traditional religious groups actively participated in the broader quest to establish a Sidama Regional State. According to some participants, traditional community elders encouraged people to defend the Sidama nation and resist those opposed to Sidama statehood.<sup>40</sup> This culminated in the direct intervention of Sidama elders in the *cämbälala* celebrations surrounding both clashes, where they told those involved to be ‘courageous’ for the Sidama cause and that it was God’s will to act now.<sup>41</sup> As one Sidama informant put it, the elders ‘ignited the people to use force’ for the realization of Sidama statehood:

People who gathered at Gudumaale [an open area in Hawassa consecrated for the traditional celebration of *cämbälala*] responded accordingly. They were instrumental in arousing anger among the attendants, saying that ‘you have no job because those Southerners took it from you’.<sup>42</sup>

In addition to the involvement of Sidama traditional religion, the majority of informants agreed that, in one way or the other, the 2018/2019 conflicts involved various other religious communities. Almost every informant asserted that the *Ejeto* sang remixed Protestant songs when attacking Wolayta homes and churches, despite their victims also being Protestant. These attacks were not only confined to Hawassa city, but spread to different parts of the Sidama region, where five Orthodox churches were set alight (three of which were razed to the ground). Some Catholics and Muslims also joined the Protestant Sidama in attacking the Wolayta.

When it came to assessing the role played by Sidama and non-Sidama religious leaders, there was very little consensus among informants. Some participants repeatedly emphasized Sidama culture’s peaceful nature, with one emphatically claiming that the ‘Sidama is a peace-loving nation; historically it has a culture of reconciliation and peace-making’.<sup>43</sup> This informant refrained from discussing the violence that took place in 2018 and 2019. Others similarly chose

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40 Interview with IRC member #2, Protestant.

41 Currently, the leaders who officiated the ritual both in 2018 and 2019 are considered by informants as ‘The Elders with “no *hallale*” [“with no truth in them”], as compared to the ‘rightful elders’.

42 Interview with pastor #4, Protestant.

43 Interview with civil servant, Protestant.

to skip over the subject or categorically denied any religious dimension to the conflict, instead blaming youth or lay members for the violence.<sup>44</sup> Other informants, however, highlighted the role played by Sidama religious leaders in fuelling the clashes. One study participant claimed political and religious figures were equally to blame:

The Sidama government officials sponsored the transportation of the youth using tracks to transport the youth. They bought gases so that the youth burn the houses of the non-Sidama. There was surely a political mobilization. Regarding the protest and its result, I would say that though it was started by the political elites, it was also spearheaded by church leaders. There are cases when Protestant churches used their pulpit for political propaganda ... There are also cases where Pastors and Elders have participated in both sides of the political mobilization. Some, mainly the Sidama, stood with and supported those who were pro-Sidama statehood.<sup>45</sup>

While some religious leaders actively aided political mobilization or supported violence, others emphasized the need to keep the struggle peaceful. Here, it is interesting to note that informants referred to just two Sidama pastors they believed remained neutral during the whole process.<sup>46</sup> Even neutrality, however, could be taken as a sign of complicity in a context where Protestant communities were being driven apart by violence. The lines demarcating religion, ethnicity and the politics of citizenship became increasingly blurred, especially among the Sidama, where almost everyone embraced the Protestant faith and saw Hawassa as the 'new Protestant Jerusalem'.<sup>47</sup>

Study participants were also unable to agree on the role played by non-Sidama religious leaders. Some informants openly critiqued the involvement of Sidama church leaders in the ethno-political struggle, whom they saw as openly supporting the *Ejeto*, but refrained from disclosing that some Wolayta and Kembata church leaders actively stood against the struggle for Sidama nationhood. Moreover, such narratives were typically one-sided concerning conflict causalities, focusing on Wolayta victims while barely mentioning the Sidama youth who lost their lives.<sup>48</sup> Others, however, pointed out that non-Sidama leaders were all but impartial:

Some prominent people were invited to advise the youth. Those who used to work on the media were Wolayta. They invited prominent Wolayta pastors; it was expected that they would direct the youth to be calm. However, they proved to be biased. They said that the Sidama attacked the Wolayta; it was clear that what they were saying was favouring

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44 Interviews with reverend #2, Protestant; and pastor #6, Protestant.

45 Interview with pastor #4, Protestant.

46 Interview with pastor #6, Protestant.

47 Interview with IRC member #1, Protestant.

48 It is claimed that 15 people died at the hands of Wolayta. Even if this is accepted, however, some may still argue that these casualties occurred as a result of Wolayta attempting to defend themselves.

the Wolayta. It was the time where the Sidama people were disappointed against the religious leaders and started to mistrust them.<sup>49</sup>

The involvement of non-Sidama pastors in such activities was regarded as actively standing against the Sidama, especially as such efforts allegedly involved lobbying those at the very top of the Ethiopian government:

A prominent pastor who is originally from Wolayta but lived and served in Hawassa for a very long time, has opposed the process of Sidama's quest for statehood. With a few others, he even advised the Prime Minister Abiy, a fellow Protestant, not to allow Sidama's statehood. People heard about this. We heard that the PM criticized him.<sup>50</sup>

Despite disagreement on religious leaders' level of participation in the debates surrounding Sidama statehood, it is clear that those who wish to do so can cite numerous examples of Protestant leadership involvement. This helps in understanding why relations between Sidama and non-Sidama Protestants remained tense even after the establishment of Sidama Regional State in 2020.

## RELIGIOUS PEACE INITIATIVES BEFORE AND DURING THE CONFLICTS

Participants also gave numerous accounts of peace initiatives pursued by religious leaders during the conflicts, including how Sidama religious leaders intervened to protect the Wolayta and other targeted groups, and negotiated with the *Ejeto* for calm.<sup>51</sup> Some Protestant leaders and teachers were, apparently, willing to confront the *Ejeto* even if doing so presented a threat to their own life or reputation.<sup>52</sup> For example, a Sidama pastor narrates that:

I may say that there were a few Sidamas who tried to be neutral during the clashes. I myself managed to hide four Wolayta in my home and then sent them to Sodo safely afterwards. One of them, a very known and respected businessman in the town ... was actually a close relative of my wife. I know that he was one of the 'informants' who closely work with the 'opposition camp'. But I have to help them out. I know that such action was life-threatening for me. It is due to the fact that I was well respected among those youth that I was not attacked.<sup>53</sup>

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49 Interview with pastor #6, Protestant.

50 Interview with pastor #4, Protestant.

51 Interview with catechist, Catholic. Some of these religious leaders are prominent leaders in their respective religions and denominations, as well as representatives of the Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia (IRC).

52 Interview with theologian/pastor, Protestant.

53 Interview with pastor #4, Protestant.

This is one among many similar testimonies.<sup>54</sup> To protect and hide the ‘enemy’ meant compromising oneself, and potentially being regarded as a traitor. The above informant was fully aware that he may have been ‘ostracized in the church’ for not supporting ‘the cause of Sidama people in a way the majority wanted to’.<sup>55</sup> One pastor who protected many Wolayta from being attacked noted: ‘Sidama were not happy about it, and even had to hold a grudge against me for some time. They accused me of “acting as a lawyer for that ethnic group”’.<sup>56</sup> Another pastor’s public confrontation with the *Ejeto* became a story remembered by many:

In one a public meeting, I personally said that what is going on [killing of the non-Sidama] is an abomination in the sight of God. I clearly and unequivocally said that the attack on Amhara and Silte is an act of devil, and act of ‘vagabonds’. There were some youngsters [*Ejeto*] who were very angry, but many listened to my advice. I know this was one of the most difficult and unpredictable times, and to come out in public and oppose what was happening was unthinkable.<sup>57</sup>

The *Ejeto*’s violence was so aggressive that even Sidama government officials with armed bodyguards feared them. According to informants, during those difficult days only a few religious leaders from the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY) and the EOTC, as well as some Sidama elders, participated in the public reconciliation process.<sup>58</sup> An EOTC priest gave the following account:

The Wolayta were attacked due to their ethnicity. The attackers were Protestants, and it is amazing to us that most of those who were attacked were also Protestants. During those times, the Protestant churches closed their doors. Thus these Wolayta, fearing for their life, came to our churches. They preferred to take shelter in our churches’ yards. It is a tradition that the Orthodox Church, by any means, cannot close its doors on others. The attackers indeed came to our churches in search of the Wolayta. Thereafter the government wanted them to take shelter in public schools for protection and guard them by police force. The Wolayta insisted that the religious leaders accompany them there. After some time, we know that many of those Wolayta embraced the Orthodox faith and got baptized.<sup>59</sup>

Similar stories were presented by pastors for the Seventh-Day Adventists and Ethiopian Kale

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54 Interviews with reverend #1, Protestant; *qesis* (reverend) #2, Orthodox; IRC member #2; pastor #5, Protestant; catechist, Catholic; pastor, Seventh-Day Adventist; *haji* (Hawassa City Islamic Affairs), Muslim; pastor #6, Protestant; theologian/pastor, Protestant; and university lecturer, Protestant.

55 Interview with pastor #4, Protestant.

56 Interview with pastor, Seventh-Day Adventist.

57 Interview with reverend #1, Protestant.

58 Interview with reverend #1, Protestant.

59 Interview with *qesis* (reverend) #2, Orthodox.



Heywet Church (EKHC), who recounting how religious leaders gave shelter to those fleeing violence, even going as far as fending off attackers who entered their churches in pursuit of non-Sidama.<sup>60</sup> Given that religious leaders were involved in both fuelling and combatting violence, the Hawassa case thus presents a complex one when it comes to understanding the role played by religion in inter-communal violence.

## OUTCOMES OF THE HAWASSA CONFLICTS

The 2018 and 2019 clashes have left an unprecedented mark on the political, economic and socio-cultural affairs of the region in general, and Hawassa city in particular. If Sidama independence was the main aim of those behind the conflicts, they have succeeded. Following a referendum, the Sidama National Regional State was established in July 2020, with Hawassa as its capital. The city therefore serves, for the time being, as the seat of both SNNPR and Sidama Regional State, with SNNPR set to move its offices to two other southern cities at some point in 2023.<sup>61</sup>

Informants claimed that many Sidama have had regrets following the conflicts and have thus sought to re-establish peaceful relations. Upon closer inspection, however, the city once considered peaceful and welcoming appears to hold few prospects for non-Sidama residents.<sup>62</sup> The violent clashes instigated by politicians promising ‘prosperity’ to the Sidama have negatively impacted people’s perceptions of Hawassa’s future, something that holds for Sidama and non-Sidama alike. There are clear signs of disappointment, frustration and even resentment among Sidama, who feel their efforts towards realization of a regional state have only succeeded in bringing corrupt politicians to power. A leading Protestant pastor claimed:

The government officials are Christians only by name. Marital unfaithfulness is common among them. The corruption level is getting shockingly high. The members of regional representatives and the officials of the city council members ... they are not having good witness for Christ.<sup>63</sup>

As the above quote suggests, some Protestants hold up widespread moral failure as an explanation for political conflict. According to this reading, the clashes are evidence of a thoroughly corrupted leadership, which must be reformed if inter-communal peace is to be restored. These totalizing, idealistic sentiments about religion and politics appear to be interwoven with a certain amount of personal and collective guilt:

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60 Interviews with pastor, Seventh-Day Adventist; and university lecturer, Protestant.

61 The name remains ‘SNNPR’ despite two regional states having already split off. Following the formation of Sidama Regional State, another regional state—South-West Ethiopia Regional State—was also created. See ‘South West Ethiopia Peoples Region Officially Established’, ENA, 23 November 2021. Accessed 21 April 2023, [www.ena.et/web/eng/w/en\\_30764](http://www.ena.et/web/eng/w/en_30764).

62 The Oromo are perhaps the exception to this, as informants generally assumed that the current Sidama leadership is pro-Oromo, in contrast to its relationships with other non-Sidama.

63 Interview with pastor #3, Protestant.

Nowadays some have regretted ... There are of course a few who are happy. Those on the top position have every reason to be happy. I would say that almost all of those in the lower level have regretted. We know some politicians tried to portray that what they did was for the benefit of the people, but at the end, we saw that it was only them who benefitted from the change.<sup>64</sup>

During fieldwork, it became obvious that people were seeking support from outside the political and governmental apparatus, with the clashes and the referendum on Sidama statehood having failed to provide answers to the city's challenged economy. This has likely fed mistrust in the politics of inter-ethnic resentment, leading some residents to seek a better, more peaceful coexistence. More generally, the Hawassa conflicts have left many Sidama and non-Sidama unsure of the future.

Settlement patterns are shifting as people anticipate the forthcoming departure of the SNNPR offices. Residents are also concerned about the possibility of future clashes, as the government has announced another round of referenda on whether SNNPR should be further broken up. Given that the idea is to divide this 'big and complex' regional state into at least four smaller states, many fear the huge implications that arise for Hawassa's current residents and where they will end up:

The SNNPR will move its offices to Arbaminch and Hossana. I fear that this will negatively affect many families and our nations. People who have inter-ethnic marriages will no doubt be affected by this. What will happen to the civil servants who are working under SNNPR and who are already residents of Hawassa? Where they will choose to be? And the effect also will have an implication for the denomination and local church leaders, both full-time and part-time leaders, choirs and deacons. Some have already started panicking and looking for jobs somewhere else, and even asking me to help them search for jobs. I fear that this will bring conflict in many marriages. I have seen that the church is not ready to face the challenge.<sup>65</sup>

Informants claimed existing religious organizations will have to reorganize themselves into Sidama and SNNPR units, with some head offices potentially having to leave the city. Should this take place, it will be disruptive for the families of ministers, as well as ordinary church members. Moreover, with many non-Sidama—even those not working for government offices—choosing to leave the city as soon as possible, there are concerns that Hawassa will become progressively more dominated by the Sidama and less welcoming to non-Sidama. Even those informants who noted that social interactions in general were developing in a positive direction were beset by unease about the future, citing the failures of community and religious leaders in previous clashes as a cause for concern:

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64 Interview with theologian/pastor, Protestant.

65 Interview with university lecturer, Protestant.



Today, I think religious people and leaders, whether Qes [Orthodox priest], pastor, imam, have lost their previous respect. 'If there is no faithfulness, respect would not be earned.' Honestly, who from the religious leaders could speak about peace and reconciliation boldly after all those messes? Since the religious groups are politicized, there is minimal moral to talk and facilitate peace.<sup>66</sup>

It thus seems that future anticipations are similarly affected by general moralizing critiques of religious leadership that we have seen above. Previously influential community leaders appear to have lost their relevance, reputations tarnished due to their perceived involvement in the conflicts. This not only pertains to those who encouraged the violence unleashed by Sidama youth, but those Protestant leaders who remained passive and are now being criticized for failing to intervene. As a result, new Protestant leaders are entering the spotlight, mainly due to their peacekeeping and reconciliation activities during and after the conflicts.<sup>67</sup> Some also doubt the sincerity of these new leaders, however, and the Protestant leadership in Hawassa will likely remain divided amid the ongoing reckoning with the conflicts. A similar process seems to be playing out regarding Sidama traditional religion, with people now distinguishing between the 'false elders' who supported the conflicts and 'elders who speak the truth', who have overseen subsequent, peaceful *čämbälala* celebrations.

Beyond the question of leadership, both Protestant and Catholic churches increasingly appear to be dividing themselves up along ethnic lines.<sup>68</sup> There are now churches that are predominantly Sidama; churches that are Wolayta-only; and local churches with predominantly Kambata members and leadership. Moreover, further fragmentation of already ethnicized religious groups along clan affiliation has become evident, particularly among the Sidama, posing a new issue for religious communities.

There are also inter-religious implications, with some regarding the Sidama monopolization of government offices as the dawn of a Protestant regime in Hawassa. One Muslim study participant noted:

The government officials confuse their government responsibility with that of their own religious conviction ... There surely was [misuse of public service] during the previous EPRDF government too, but things were almost out of control after the establishment of Sidama National State. They want to impose their religion and want everyone know that Protestants are majority. Then you really feel it. You know that we don't have equal right. We are not treated equally.<sup>69</sup>

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66 Interview with elder #1, Protestant.

67 Interview with reverend #1, Protestant.

68 Interview with pastor #4, Protestant.

69 Interview with youth co-ordinator #2, Muslim.

A concern expressed by Hawasa residents is that they have been subject to ethnic and religious profiling: the Gurage (considered as Silte) are usually regarded as Muslims, while the Amhara and some of the Wolayta (mainly those living in the central areas of Hawassa) are generally considered EOTC members.

Yet, even in the midst of these shifting ethnic patterns and concerns about the future, many informants tempered their lament for the loss of peaceful coexistence in the city with the hope that earlier 'glory days' could be restored through a process of normalization and reconciliation. As a Sidama Protestant pastor observed:

Looking at what happened to us now spiritually and socially, I still insist that we must hold 'a national day of repentance' and 'a national day of forgiveness' in Sidama. We must ask God to forgive us, and we must also ask others to forgive us.<sup>70</sup>

This highlights how, despite the failings of religious leaders, there remains a sense that religious communities and beliefs are essential to reckoning with the past and improving Hawassa's prospects for peaceful coexistence.

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70 Interview with theologian/pastor, Protestant. This represents a call for Protestants in particular to compensate those who have been hurt.

# RELIGIONS AND PEACEBUILDING

While religion may not have been a primary cause of the Hawassa clashes, religious leaders and institutions nonetheless acted as both catalysts and inhibitors for conflict. This raises the question of the peacebuilding potential of Hawassa's religions in the post-conflict context, something that was dealt with on two levels by study participants: first, by reflecting on the significance of individual religious leaders and communities, and second, by examining the role of religious and inter-religious organizations.

## POST-CONFLICT HAWASSA: RECONCILIATION AND RELIGIOUS PEACE-MAKING EFFORTS

A number of interviewees conveyed that there has been substantial reflection on the failure of religious teachings to equip the faithful in facing complex political situations and responding to rising ethnic tensions. Despite disagreement on some of the issues discussed above, many religious leaders see the clashes as an opportunity to analyse what went wrong in inter-communal relations and build a better future for Hawassa.

One area of particular reckoning has been the relationship between religion and politics. There was general agreement that trust in governmental and political bodies has been significantly eroded. With political institutions seemingly incapable of securing peaceful coexistence, some informants indicated that religions could provide a stronger foundation for social cohesion. Inevitably, such assertions were dressed in supernatural assumptions about the world and societal peace, with one informant, for example, claiming that the Sidama would only regain God's favour through repentance and forgiveness.<sup>71</sup> More importantly, such assumptions came with an imperative for religions to avoid the rhetoric of any politicians and government leaders. Accordingly, one participant emphasized that, 'Religion must separate from politics. Religion has to serve the purpose to which it is created for.'<sup>72</sup>

Eschewing politics, informants placed their hopes in Hawassa's everyday social bonds, which, despite being challenged by the recent unrest, was not regarded as being entirely tarnished. A Protestant church leader asserted that there remains a strong and vibrant social life in Hawassa:

Since we have common ground as human beings and believers, we celebrate religious

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71 Interview with theologian/pastor, Protestant.

72 Interview with pastor #1, Protestant.

festivals together. Since we have common cultural values, we host members of different religions in our houses. We have a culture of dining together. At times we gather in one place, and stay close to the other. Since we live as one, we haven't seen things that magnify our differences. There is nothing that has magnified hatred and differences.<sup>73</sup>

This conviction was shared by an Orthodox informant, who claimed that although tension does exist, particularly 'when politics and the economy are involved', people still cooperated at a societal level: 'Despite our religious differences, we attend weddings and funerals of people of other faiths and freely participate in the lives of others. We freely go to houses and console when someone we know face may face bereavement.'<sup>74</sup> This was a common narrative among interviewees, many of whom asserted that people cooked food alongside members of other religious groups during weddings and bereavements.

## RELIGIOUS AND INTER-RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS

A slightly different picture emerges regarding religious organizations more generally. On the Muslim side, the Hawassa City Islamic Affairs Supreme Council appears to be very active when it comes to peacebuilding among its constituents. One informant put it in the following terms:

As it is common in any religion, we also have some minor issues that divide us. In Hawassa, it is however not strong as such. We have some differences but there is no issue that needed arbitration. We have had conflict two years back, around 2013 EC, but we tried to solve it not by interference of politicians but through wise decisions of our Mejlis leaders. The leaders of our religion were the ones who solved the problem. We have some elders who are very respected and whom all of us could listen to for advise. I may have some differences when comes to the issues of faith, I have respected leaders whom I hear when they speak and advise.<sup>75</sup>

This story was corroborated by another informant, who noted more explicitly that these issues relate to discussions between the Sufi and Reformist wings in Islam, but equally asserted that they did not allow internal differences to emerge openly.<sup>76</sup>

On the Protestant side, a very different picture emerges. The impact of the Evangelical Churches Fellowship of Ethiopia (ECFE)—historically the umbrella organization for all Protestants—

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73 Interview with reverend #2, Protestant.

74 Interview with *liqe-lisanat* (arch-preacher), Orthodox.

75 Interview with youth co-ordinator #2, Muslim. Also, another informant reported a situation whereby a EEMYC leader seemed to be very positive regarding the future role of the council, but critical of 'other' newly emerging churches that are, in fact, members of the organization (interview with *haji* (Hawassa City Islamic Affairs), Muslim).

76 Interview with catechist, Catholic.

seems to be diminishing,<sup>77</sup> particularly when compared to its previous decisive role in Hawassa and its surrounding areas. This loss of national relevance began when the two largest Protestant churches, the EKHC and EECMY, left the ECFE. More recently, a new competitor has emerged in the form the Ethiopian Gospel Believers Council (EGBC), established at the behest of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed as an umbrella organization for all Protestants. This effort failed, however, leading to the ECFE's recent departure from the EGBC, alongside a number of other, mostly Pentecostal, churches.<sup>78</sup> Despite the leader of the EGBC in Hawassa claiming that 'the Gospel Council created a good platform' to discuss matters of faith newer churches considered deviant,<sup>79</sup> both the ECFE and EGBC appear to have struggled to reorganize. As such, it is difficult to imagine them—at least in their current state—successfully mobilizing the city or even their own believers towards peacebuilding. The much-invoked 'spirit of unity' among Protestants remains elusive, with the EGBC proving controversial even among its member churches. A local EKHC church leader complained:

We are very challenged by false teaching. Some known false teachers in the country are from EKHC. Moreover, EKHC is now part of the new established Gospel Council that holds many emerging denominations (among which are even false teachers) ... They were even losing ground in Hawassa, but the Gospel Council seems to revive them.<sup>80</sup>

Although the EGBC is well recognized at the national level, it seems barely functional at the regional level.<sup>81</sup> Meanwhile, the nationwide withdrawal of the EKHC and EECMY from the ECFE has created confusion regionally, with Hawassa's Protestant leaders yet to fully grasp the process:

Gaps have been created between denominations which are even getting wider. EECMY and EKHC are now part of the Ethiopian Gospel Believers' Council [EGBC], and we are no more part of the ECFE. We know that this affected our relations with mainline churches. The relation between the two organizations is not good at this time. What is important is, the people are one; the problem is among the elites. People still cherish the

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77 The research does not include any outcomes arising from the November 2022 consecutive meetings to 'revive and reinvigorate ECFE in Hawassa'.

78 Hausteine, Jörg, Abduletif Idris, and Diego Malara. *Religion in Contemporary Ethiopia: History, Politics, and Inter-Religious Relations*. Addis Ababa: Rift Valley Institute, 2023, <https://riftvalley.net/publication/religion-contemporary-ethiopia-history-politics-and-inter-religious-relations>, 36-37.

79 Interview with reverend #2, Protestant.

80 Interview with pastor #1, Protestant.

81 Even EKHC leaders failed to understand the intention behind the EGBC's establishment, despite the leading role their denomination has taken in its establishment: 'Honestly speaking, we don't know what this council is. Its mission is not clearly known to us. We know it is recently established and operating nationwide however we don't really know what it is. What we know is that a tension was already created after its establishment' (interview with university lecturer, Protestant).

fellowship that once created in earlier times.<sup>82</sup>

Currently, Protestant efforts at mutual fellowship and conflict resolution seem to be limited to the level of individual denominations, with local parishes from the same denomination holding monthly prayer sessions or conferences. Such efforts appear necessary to hold the denominations together amid ongoing inter-communal tensions:

We try to solve local church's problem within local church, if not, we solve it in a city-wide fellowship level. We have also a city-wide prayer programme, teaching sessions, and time of fellowship, among which is Hawassa EKHC women fellowship can be mentioned; they are prayerful, and they can be referred to as the main factors to keep the church lively in the midst of ethnic-oriented division in EKHC.<sup>83</sup>

Another pastor similarly indicated that churches were focusing more on the level of parishes and even individuals in order to prevent communal fragmentation: 'The only option for us now is strengthening local churches. ... also, we strive to teach our members by concentrating on the inner man.'<sup>84</sup>

With the largest religion in Hawassa so significantly fragmented, the Inter-Religious Council (IRC) appears to have stepped in to fill the gap.<sup>85</sup> In contrast to many other places in Ethiopia, the IRC in Hawassa is seen as an important, active catalyst for initiating good relations among religious communities. Most Christian denominations and Islam are equally represented in Hawassa's IRC, with their leaders apparently working in harmony. The fact that the current IRC chairperson is from the EOTC seems to help, as this church was badly affected by the conflicts but is not seen as one of the instigators.

During the 2019 conflict, the IRC convened a public meeting at which the violence was robustly condemned at considerable personal risk to those speaking up.<sup>86</sup> This strong interference later allowed the IRC to help facilitate the reconciliation process, with youth from every woreda (district) invited. The IRC also supported church reconstruction, helped channel financial

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82 Interview with reverend #2, Protestant.

83 Interview with elder #1, Protestant.

84 Interview with pastor #1, Protestant.

85 Like the national IRC, the Hawassa IRC consists of seven religious organisations (EOTC, Islamic Supreme Council, Catholic Church, Seventh-Day Adventist Church, ECFE, EKHC and EECMY, with the latter three organisations being Protestant). Officially, it is a 'non-government' organization, founded by the EPRDF government in 2002 with a vision 'to develop religious freedom and equality based on peace, love and tolerance, which will be mutually beneficial to all' See: URI, 'Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia'. Accessed 15 April 2023, [www.uri.org/who-we-are/cooperation-circle/interreligious-council-ethiopia](http://www.uri.org/who-we-are/cooperation-circle/interreligious-council-ethiopia). One may rightly doubt the IRC's freedom from ruling party interference, however, given that its funds are channelled by and through the government.

86 Interview with reverend #1, Protestant.

compensation and promoted spiritual reconciliation.

Moreover, the IRC's current relevance has been propelled by a recognition among most denominations that they were ill-prepared for the 2018/2019 conflicts. With the possible exception of the Catholics, who had undertaken some youth violence prevention measures,<sup>87</sup> religious communities fell short in equipping their members to navigate communal tensions and violence. Even in the Catholic Church, prevention activities did not extend to Hawassa's countryside, from where a number of the attackers appeared to hail. Having mutually acknowledged their failures in conflict prevention, Hawassa's religious community leaders embraced the IRC's relevancy as a forum for co-ordination and preparation. In the aftermath of the 2019 clashes, the government and many NGOs also recognized the importance of the IRC as a forum. As mentioned above, the IRC's intervention during the clashes won it the trust of the religious communities, enabling it to act as a facilitator of inter-communal discussions.<sup>88</sup>

The IRC claims it now works first and foremost to alleviate 'unhealthy feeling towards the other', before any communal tension can erupt into conflict. Accordingly, its primary focus is on conflict prevention, although it is also engaged in putting in place measures to take during clashes and reconciliation processes.<sup>89</sup> All such efforts foreground common religious values as the basis of neighbourly relations. One religious leader who works closely with IRC emphasized the ongoing work in support of this:

We hold conferences and counselling sessions, and create a dialogue to keep the situation under control. This preventative activities aim towards keeping our society not to engage in issues that leads to clashes. We actively engage the society mainly before any public religious celebrations takes place. We hold dialogue and discussion meetings.<sup>90</sup>

The trauma of the clashes, as well as the inspiring tales of those who interfered positively, have helped drive the IRC's peace initiatives. To this end, the IRC employs various forms of media (such as FM radios), public announcements and displays, and professional/academic training sessions to address the public regarding peaceful coexistence. Nonetheless, the IRC needs further political and communal support if it is to thrive in its role as communal peacebuilding forum. Despite the IRC's many activities, its impact remains limited, as indicated by the fact that most of the information gathered about these activities came from interviews with IRC members, while other participants barely mentioned the organization at all.

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87 Interview with catechist, Catholic.

88 Interview with *qesis* (reverend) #1, Orthodox.

89 Interview with IRC member #2, Protestant.

90 Interview with IRC member #2, Protestant.

The role of the Hawassa IRC also extends to addressing issues within particular denominations:

There are also problems related to ethnic tension which we all tried to solve in our Inter-Religious Council; for example, one of the pastors of a Protestant church was excommunicated and he filed complaints with us; we interfered, and we found out that the main issue was not related to his ability to lead but his ethnic affiliation. The majority Sidama members of the local church were not happy just because he was from Gedeo. There are issues that still need to be addressed, mainly between Sidama and Wolayta, and between Sidama and Kembata Protestant Christians.<sup>91</sup>

This again illustrates how the fragmented Protestant landscape has helped the IRC thrive as a peacebuilding forum. While this can be viewed as representing an important step towards religious coexistence and mutual support, the IRC is still some distance from achieving its vision of inter-religious peace. Several Orthodox and Muslim study participants outside of IRC circles expressed harsh opinions on Protestants, including a fear that they were claiming political positions at the expense of others or actively undermining inter-religious peace.<sup>92</sup> Conversely, some Protestants expressed resentment towards Orthodox political influence, while others complained about the mushrooming number of mosques in Hawassa and saw Islam as a rising 'danger'.<sup>93</sup> Clearly, while the IRC has gained some prominence in the aftermath of Hawassa's inter-ethnic clashes, it has yet to build a broad consensus of inter-religious trust.

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91 Interview with catechist, Catholic.

92 Interviews with IRC member #1; youth co-ordinator #1, Muslim; youth co-ordinator #2, Muslim; pastor #4, Protestant; *qesis* (reverend) #2, Orthodox; *abba* (father), Orthodox; and *haji*, Muslim (Hawassa City Islamic Affairs *haji* (Hawassa City Islamic Affairs), Muslim.

93 Interviews with elder #1, Protestant; civil servant, Protestant; pastor #3, Protestant; and pastor #6, Protestant.



## CONCLUSION

In contrast to contemporaneous conflicts elsewhere in Ethiopia that appeared to run predominantly along inter-religious fault-lines, the clashes in Hawassa arose from Sidama nationalism and the political battle for a referendum on establishing a Sidama Regional State. Co-religionists, in particular Protestants, attacked one another based on ethnic difference. This does not mean, however, that religion was not an important dimension of the conflict. This report has demonstrated how religion was instrumentalized by political actors, whether in the form of Sidama traditional religion or the singing of Protestant songs during attacks. Moreover, this arguably went beyond mere political instrumentalization, with churches becoming forums for ethnic division and some Christians actively supporting the conflict, whether due to nationalistic rallying cries or fearful calls to self-defence. Historical configurations of religion and ethnicity—with certain ethnicities identified as primarily Orthodox, Muslim or Protestant—also meant the ethnic clashes gained an inter-religious dimension. At the same time, religious leaders and institutions such as the IRC were engaged in peaceful interventions, both during and after the conflicts.

Two contradictions therefore emerge when considering the role of religion in Hawassa's conflicts. First, during the clashes themselves, religious institutions and leaders were seen to both fuel and alleviate conflict. There were reports of the active and passive involvement of religious communities and leaders in violence. Some actively stoked resentment, others merely drew on religious ideas, and others who should have spoken out kept their distance in order to preserve their own safety. Others again, however, were willing to put their lives at risk, either by speaking out publicly against the violence or sheltering victims. The contradictory role played by religion in the clashes was especially pronounced among Protestants and traditional leaders, bringing to the fore internal divisions in both groups.

The second contradiction relates to the present situation. The conflicts and their aftermath have placed a spotlight on new religious leaders and respected Christian community members who could play significant roles in driving peaceful religious coexistence. Again, this is most pronounced among traditional elders and Protestants, where a leadership change seems to be underway. Moreover, the conflicts appear to have strengthened the IRC's role as a communal religious peacebuilding platform. Nonetheless, many residents face considerable uncertainty amid fears of further clashes while the new regional boundaries and capitals are sorted out. Suspicions remain between religious groups, and ethnic tensions persist. Competition between religions over public space and authority in Hawassa city is frequently in evidence, particularly during religious festivals such as *Mäskäl*, *Ṭəmṣät* and *Eid*. Friction in day-to-day interactions is also apparent, mainly arising from extremist religious expressions and actions, while trust in

the government's ability to maintain law and order is low.

Thus, the traditional view of Hawassa as one of Ethiopia's more peaceful and vibrant cities has been significantly challenged by the 2018/2019 conflicts. While the image of a multi-ethnic city welcoming of 'others', where people freely engage in economic and social interaction, was still very much alive among study participants, it was clear the conflicts had left a lasting mark. The peacebuilding process has taken longer than anticipated, mainly due to issues around mutual trust and political uncertainty. It is a hopeful sign that religious communities now seem more involved in peacebuilding measures, with the IRC playing an important role in conflict prevention training and alleviating intra- and inter-religious tensions. If these initiatives can be extended and maintained over time, with appropriate local and external support, this raises the prospect of religious communities being transformed from political platforms in conflict to important agents for peace and development.

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