

# BEING MUSLIM & BECOMING ETHIOPIAN:

CONTEMPORARY DYNAMICS AMONG ETHIOPIAN MUSLIMS

Terje Østebø



**Rift Valley Institute**  
MAKING LOCAL KNOWLEDGE WORK



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## THE ETHIOPIA PEACE RESEARCH FACILITY

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## DESIGN/LAYOUT

Designed by Maggie Dougherty.

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# SUMMARY

In the wake of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) gaining power in 1991, a religious resurgence driven by various Islamic reform movements produced a more active, visible Muslim community. Over time, the government came to regard this as evidence of increased extremism and launched the so-called ‘*al-Ahbash*’ campaign in 2011. The Muslim community, viewing this as unconstitutional interference in religious affairs, took to the streets of Addis Ababa to protest. These protests, which became known as *Dimtsachen Yisema* (‘Hear Our Voices’), were brutally suppressed by the authorities in August 2013.

Nevertheless, the protests birthed novel discourses about the meaning of democracy, civil rights and secularism, producing what can be referred to as the *Dimtsachen Yisema* generation, many of them young Muslims who have gone through higher education and entered the workforce. This engagement in broader Ethiopian society has prompted new questions around inter-religious relations, societal responsibility and political engagement, with young Muslims forced to negotiate what it means to be both a good Muslim and good Ethiopian.

While Abiy Ahmed’s religious policies following his ascendance in 2018 have further emboldened religious actors, many Protestant and Orthodox Christians view an increasingly active Muslim community as upsetting the balance between different religions. It is clear that Abiy Ahmed is less preoccupied than his predecessors by the spectre of extremism, enabling previously marginalized groups to move centre-stage—including installing senior Salafis to the leadership of the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC).

Developments since the Muslim protests have also seen the emergence of a new category of actor, commonly referred to as the *ustazes*. Deeply pious, these young activists have managed to engage in debates on non-religious issues while still being considered good Muslims. In doing so, they have become influential religious role models. They have also critiqued Salafi teachings—which focus on religious purity—for being too narrow and failing to address the needs of the youth. This erosion of Salafi authority has led many senior Salafis to re-negotiate their earlier religious viewpoints.

Based on the above, this briefing makes the following recommendations:

- Observers should refrain from relying on an exclusively Islamic extremism lens when attempting to understand Ethiopia’s Muslim community.
- Inter-religious violence should be understood as the product of a changing religious landscape.

- While ethnic-based violence remains a grave concern, developments within Ethiopia's religious communities should also be taken into account.
- Ethiopian and international stakeholders should engage with the Muslim community beyond the EIASC.
- Efforts should be made to produce in-depth studies that offer grounded, nuanced insights into dynamics within the Muslim community (as well as within other religious communities).

# INTRODUCTION

Muslims constitute approximately 33 per cent of Ethiopia’s population—the third largest Muslim population in Africa. Major Muslim groups include the Somali, Afar, Gurage, Silte and Amharic-speaking Muslims in Wollo.<sup>1</sup> In addition, an estimated 50 per cent of the Oromo are Muslim.<sup>2</sup> In other words, Ethiopia’s Muslim population is multifaceted in nature, encompassing disparate ethnic groups, localities and socio-economic contexts. As such, this briefing makes no attempt to paint a complete picture of dynamics within the country-wide Muslim community. Nevertheless, in honing in on developments at the central level since the Muslim protests of 2012–2013, often referred to as the *Dimtsachen Yesima* (‘Hear Our Voices’), it is important to acknowledge that the dynamics at play have had an impact on Muslim localities across the country. Many of the actors at the central level hail from Ethiopia’s various regions, implying a reciprocal relationship between centre and periphery.

Against the above backdrop, this briefing argues that the widespread narrative of increasing extremism among Muslims—believed to represent a threat to political stability and inter-religious relations—is too reductive a starting point for construing the current situation.

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1 Amharic-speaking Muslims have traditionally not referred to themselves as Amhara, which was associated with being an Orthodox Christian.

2 Central Statistical Office, ‘Ethiopia - Population and Housing Census of 2007’, Addis Ababa: Office of the Population and Housing Census Commission, 2007.



# BACKGROUND

Historically, Ethiopia's Muslims were one of the country's most marginalized communities. Over time, this manifested as an increasingly insular outlook, involving limited engagement with broader Ethiopian socio-political affairs. This history and its continued salience are often poorly understood by foreign observers, who tend to focus on marginalization arising from ethnicity rather than religion.<sup>3</sup>

The political transition in 1991 marked the beginning of a period that would transform Ethiopian Muslims' marginal position. The incoming Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) reversed the deposed Derg government's restrictions on religious expression and allowed space for religious activism, leading to a dramatic religious resurgence among both the Muslim population and Orthodox and Protestant Christians.<sup>4</sup> The new political climate opened the door for increased interaction with the wider Muslim world, bringing Ethiopian Muslims into contact with different Islamic reform currents. The most important of these was Salafism, which had already started making inroads in the 1960s and expanded rapidly after 1991. Contradicting earlier religious practices commonly associated with Sufism, Salafi teaching is particularly focused on ritual purity, emphasizing personal piety through the diligent performance of Islam's prescribed practices. Another current was the so-called 'Intellectualist' movement, which drew inspiration from ideas loosely associated with the Muslim Brotherhood. Also important was Jama'a al-Tabligh—a major international Muslim *da'wa* organization.<sup>5</sup>

When talking about Islamic reformism in Ethiopia, it is important to note that these are ideological currents rather than movements with set organizational frameworks. Compared to the hierarchal Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) and the distinct Protestant

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- 3 For an overview and references to further reading, see: Jörg Haustein, Abduletif Kedir Idris and Diego Malara, 'Religion in Contemporary Ethiopia: History, Politics and Inter-Religious Relations', Rift Valley Institute, 2023.
  - 4 For more details on this period, see: Jörg Haustein and Terje Østebø, 'EPRDF's Revolutionary Democracy and Religious Plurality: Islam and Christianity in Post-Derg Ethiopia', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 5/4 (2011): 755–772; Patrick Desplat and Terje Østebø, eds., *Muslim Ethiopia: The Christian Legacy, Identity Politics, and Islamic Reformism*, New York: Palgrave, 2013.
  - 5 *Da'wa* refers to the call to turn to Islam. Virtually nothing is known about Jama'a al-Tabligh's activities in Ethiopia. Terje Østebø, 'The Question of Becoming: Islamic Reform Movements in Contemporary Ethiopia', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 38/4 (2008): 416–446; Terje Østebø, 'Islamic Reformism as Network of Meaning: The Intellectualist Movement in Ethiopia', *Sociology of Islam* 4/3 (2016): 189–214; Terje Østebø and Walleign Shemsedin, 'Ethiopian Muslims and the Discourse about Moderation', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 55/2 (2017): 225–249.



denominations, Islam in Ethiopia has a very informal, decentralized character. This reflects the community's longer-term history of marginalization, which restricted Muslims' opportunities to organize themselves.<sup>6</sup> The lack of organizational frameworks means these reform currents are not always ideologically coherent and inherently dynamic, with the boundaries between them often blurry. Thus, it has become common for Ethiopia's Muslims to cross ideological boundaries and draw inspiration from different currents in a somewhat eclectic manner. Different ideological orientations are represented by particular scholars, activists and other figures, making it difficult to obtain any overarching perspective on the country's Muslim community.

For many young Ethiopian Muslims, there was a strong shift in the early 1990s towards 'becoming Muslim'—essentially, exploring and strengthening their Muslim identity. This involved developing a new religious subjectivity, which also entailed ideological battles with established local Islamic practices. In pre-1991 Ethiopia, adherence to core Islamic practices (like daily prayers) was not necessarily common, a situation that has changed steadily since. In the late 1990s and into the early twenty-first century, the focus shifted towards the question of Muslim rights within the Ethiopian society. Muslim activists referred to Islam's historically marginalized position, claiming that religious equality had not yet been realized in Ethiopia.<sup>7</sup> An increasingly confident and visible Muslim community met frequent resistance from the government and the larger Christian population, who interpreted this assertiveness as a sign of religious radicalization. In response, the government intensified its monitoring of the Muslim community, producing a fraught relationship between Muslims and the authorities.

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6 Local Muslim communities were commonly organized around mosques. At the time, however, there was a lack of mosques, with some communities instead using shrines as focal points. There were also important centres for Islamic education that connected Muslim scholars. The first Muslim organization, the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC), was not established until 1975.

7 Similar demands for religious parity had been made previously in Ethiopia's modern history, most notably in the form of a massive demonstration prior to the revolution in 1974.

# MUSLIM PROTESTS AND THE *DIMTSACHEN YISEMA* GENERATION

The EPRDF government's efforts to combat perceived extremism took a new turn in 2011, when it invited the Lebanese *al-Ahbash* movement to Ethiopia. *Al-Ahbash*—officially named the Association of Islamic Charitable Projects—is an organization devoted to combatting any form of 'extremist' Islam, notably Salafism and the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>8</sup> The *al-Ahbash* ideology was promoted through enforced trainings across the country, which warned participants of the alleged rise of Islamic extremism and instructed them to adhere to a more moderate version of Islam.<sup>9</sup>

The Muslim community reacted strongly against the campaign and, more importantly, to what they viewed as the government's unconstitutional interference in religious affairs. The protestors' complaints also extended to the perceived co-optation of the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC), which prompted calls for the election of a new, independent council. In early 2012, protests—which became known as *Dimtsachen Yisema* ('Hear Our Voices')—erupted in the streets of Addis Ababa and other major cities. They were led by a so-called 'arbitration committee' consisting of 17 members, all of whom were arrested in July 2012, charged with inciting terrorism. Many of them were sentenced to over 22 years in prison. The arrests did not halt the protests, however. An anonymous *Dimtsachen Yisema* Facebook page continued to publicize slogans and announce when and where protests were taking place. The protests lasted until the *Id al-Fitr* prayers (marking the end of Ramadan) in August 2013, when the Ethiopian security forces initiated a violent crackdown on demonstrations.

The protests became a strong visual demonstration of Islam's presence in Ethiopia, eliciting admiration among many non-Muslim Ethiopians for the participants' courage in standing

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8 The name *al-Ahbash* (Arabic) refers to the people of Ethiopia, with the explicit Ethiopian connection embodied by Sheikh Abdallah ibn Muhammad ibn Yusuf al-Harari (1910–2006), a religious scholar from Harar who arrived in Lebanon in the 1950s and became the longtime spiritual leader of *al-Ahbash*. Since the 1980s, the organization has established branches in the Middle East, South-East Asia, Europe, North America and Australia.

9 For more details on these developments, see Terje Østebø, 'Islam and State Relations in Ethiopia: From Containment to the Production of a "Governmental Islam"', *Journal of American Academy of Religion* 81/4 (2013): 1029–1060.

up to the EPRDF government. Sympathy for the demonstrations was, however, tempered by an existing fear of the dangers posed by Islam, shaped by past conflicts where Muslims were regarded as potential collaborators with foreign forces threatening Ethiopia's sovereignty. Such fears were exacerbated by the negative image of Islam produced by the so-called 'War on Terror' and regional insecurity, particularly in Somalia where the extremist Islamist group al-Shabaab emerged after 2006. Many Ethiopians felt uncomfortable with the confidence displayed by Muslim youth taking to the streets, their apprehension further fuelled by the government's characterization of the protests as proof of growing extremism.

Rather than being expressions of extremism, however, the protests are better understood as expressing moderation—that is, an important means of birthing novel discourses about the meaning of democracy, civil rights and secularism.<sup>10</sup> The latter of these is particularly important, as the protestors accused the government of violating the secular principle enshrined in Ethiopia's constitution by unlawfully interfering in religious affairs. The protestors' strong defence of the secular framework came against a perceived backdrop of the historically Christian state denying Muslims their rights, thus rendering secularism the only secure arrangement enabling religious equality.

The protests also highlight changes among young urban Muslims. The issues of personal piety and ritual purity that drove the battles of the 1990s had retreated and much had been achieved concerning civil rights in the interim. The *Dimtsachen Yisema* protests thus represented a robust reaction against the government's efforts to curtail the space carved out by Muslims. Integral to this was a demand that the pious lifestyle of Muslims be respected, and that this was not in contradiction with being a good citizen. More generally, being thrust into political activism and engagement with broader Ethiopian society made it increasingly difficult for young Muslims to, in the words of Ismail Salwa, 'isolate moral selves from political selves'.<sup>11</sup>

The post-protest *Dimtsachen Yisema* generation is not only marked by a new religious discourse, but is the product of socio-economic developments that transformed Ethiopian society over the preceding decades. These changes were the result of the EPRDF's developmental state policies, aimed at producing economic growth. While the main focus was on rural locales, the government's policies also impacted urban areas, producing a growing urban middle class.<sup>12</sup> Foreign and local investment created job opportunities and access to wealth, with the government further facilitating space for businesspeople and entrepreneurs from the early

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10 Østebø and Shemsedin, 'Ethiopian Muslims'.

11 Salwa Ismail, 'Islamism, Re-Islamization and the Fashioning of Muslim Selves: Refiguring the Public Sphere', *Muslim Journal of Human Rights* 4/1 (2007): 1.

12 African Development Bank, 'Development Effectiveness Review on Ethiopia', 2015. [www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Development\\_Effectiveness\\_Review\\_In\\_Ethiopia/DER\\_ethiopia\\_WEB\\_EN\\_Level1.pdf](http://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Development_Effectiveness_Review_In_Ethiopia/DER_ethiopia_WEB_EN_Level1.pdf); African Development Bank, 'The middle of the pyramid: Dynamics of the middle class in Africa', Market Brief, 2011.

2000s onwards.<sup>13</sup> Parallel to this was the expansion of educational opportunities. Building on the efforts of the Derg government, the EPRDF constructed schools at all levels across the country. The government also made significant investments in higher education, leading to the number of universities in the country mushrooming from two in 2000 to 50 in 2024. These efforts reflected the need for educated professionals, and consequently educated youth found their way into a growing private sector.<sup>14</sup>

These changes also impacted Ethiopia's Muslim community, whose enrolment in higher education marked a departure from past norms. The fact that education was infused with Christianity during the Imperial era and with Marxism under the Derg prompted many Muslims to keep their children at home. This started to change in 1991, with the swelling participation in higher education seen throughout the remainder of the decade and into the 2000s producing new generations of Muslim professionals. Ethiopian Muslims have historically been deeply involved in commerce, and so the growth and opening-up of the economy that took place enhanced such opportunities. Trading connections were made with the Gulf states, while Turkey became an increasingly important partner. The establishment of several new Islamic banks since 2019 has further enhanced business opportunities. Moreover, Muslims have become more visible in Ethiopia's administrative structures, enabled by ethnic federalism, which (formally) decentralized power, and which created opportunities for Muslims resident in Muslim-dominated localities to access public offices.

Over the past decade, the *Dimtsachen Yesima* generation have continued to cement their presence, assuming higher positions within the private and public sector, and establishing their own businesses, charity organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These individuals largely consist of young urban Muslims in the capital and other major cities, as well as those in rapidly growing towns in Muslim-dominated areas. The *Dimtsachen Yesima* generation's continued engagement in broader Ethiopian society has prompted a variety of questions concerning inter-religious relations, work ethics, societal responsibility, empowerment and political engagement. It has also led to a stronger sense of belonging to Ethiopian society and a re-negotiation of what it means to be a good Muslim and good Ethiopian.

These changes and the birthing of new religious discourses have meant that many among the *Dimtsachen Yesima* generation increasingly regard Salafi teachings as irrelevant. The protests themselves brought about a reckoning with Salafism's limitations, particularly how Salafi ideas had left Muslim youth ill-prepared for public engagement. As one informant put it: 'what we realized during the protests was how the Salafi curriculum has been helpful to cultivate our piety, yet it failed to equip us with the necessary knowledge, exposure and skill to deal with

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13 Jean-Nicolas Bach and Clélie Nallet, 'Conceptualizing the Middle Class in a Developmental State: Narratives and Expectations in Ethiopia', *African Affairs* 117/468 (2018): 439–461.

14 It is also important to note that the rapid expansion of higher education combined with the imbalance between educated labour supply and demand led many into unemployment after graduating.

political matters'.<sup>15</sup> Senior Salafis were accused of being oblivious to Ethiopia's ongoing socio-political changes and thus poorly placed to respond to the needs of the youth.

While differences of opinion remain, an increasing number of young Muslims find the Salafi focus on ritual purity to be tiresome, and questions of dress-code and beard length trivial. Senior Salafis are accused of being old-fashioned, with informants complaining they were 'teaching only in traditional ways',<sup>16</sup> and that their messaging was 'boring and irrelevant'.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, maintaining one's piety by distancing oneself from broader society is viewed as obsolete. As one informant observed, 'the Salafi teaching does not prepare us to be good workers, good farmers, or to be good public servants'.<sup>18</sup>

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15 Terje Østebø and Yekatit G. Tsehayu, 'Salafism and the Local: Negotiation, Accommodation, and Re-localisation of Ethiopian Salafism', *Mediterranean Politics* (forthcoming); Østebø and Tsehayu, 'Salafism and the Local'; Interview, Addis Ababa, 21 August 2022.

16 Interview, Addis Ababa, 17 March 2023.

17 Interview, Robe, 15 March 2023.

18 Interview, Addis Ababa, 17 March 2023.

# ABIY AHMED AND THE OPENING OF SPACE

Abiy Ahmed's ascension to the premiership in 2018 was a consequence of the EPRDF government's inability to curb widespread ethnic-based protests. While there was no direct connection between these protests and the Muslim demonstrations, it is clear the willingness to confront the government displayed in the latter case provided inspiration for Oromo and Amhara youth to take to the streets.

In addition to changing the political discourse, Abiy Ahmed's ascendance has significantly impacted Ethiopia's ongoing religious dynamics. The prime minister has been open in declaring himself a born-again Pentecostal. In sharp contrast to the previous EPRDF leaders, who deliberately kept the political discourse free of religious references, Abiy Ahmed often invokes religion in his political remarks, regarding it as a positive resource for the country's development. While the prime minister's Pentecostal background is important, however, the connections between his faith, the so-called 'prosperity gospel' and politics are not as straightforward as many think.<sup>19</sup>

Abiy Ahmed's policy of opening space for religion has emboldened religious actors, which in turn has led to more fragile inter-religious relations. It has also enhanced the visibility of religion, as demonstrated during religious holidays. The 2021 celebration of the Grand *Iftar* organized in downtown Addis Ababa was a significant demonstration of Islam's presence and the *Dimtsachen Yesima* generation's confidence.<sup>20</sup> In the years since, further Grand *Iftars* have been organized both in Addis Ababa and across the country.

Abiy Ahmed is, like his predecessors, actively involved in religious affairs—albeit in a somewhat different manner. He appears less preoccupied with notions of religious extremism and has

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19 See: Terje Østebø, 'Understanding the Religion of Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed', *Journal of Modern African Studies* (forthcoming). As Jörg Hausteine and Dereje Feyissa argue, the new prime minister is not a typical 'narrow "Pente" politician'. Jörg Hausteine and Dereje Feyissa, 'The Strains of "Pente" Politics: Evangelicals and the Post-Orthodox State in Ethiopia', in *Routledge Handbook on the Horn of Africa*, ed. Jean-Nicholas Bach, London: Routledge, 2022.

20 *Iftar* is the meal that breaks the fast after sunset during the month of Ramadan. It was claimed over 100,000 Muslims gathered for prayer and an iftar meal in the streets of the capital—allegedly the largest public iftar meal in the world: 'Ethiopian Muslims Break World Record for Hosting Largest Iftar Gathering', *The Nation*, 12 May 2021. <https://nation.com.pk/12-May-2021/ethiopian-muslims-break-world-record-for-hosting-largest-iftar-gathering>.

refrained from labelling certain groups as extremists and subsequently marginalizing them. Overall, in line with his *medemer* philosophy, Abiy Ahmed has focused more on healing divisions within and between religious communities. He played a key role in ending the schism between the Ethiopia-based EOTC and the US-based EOTC-in-exile, and was instrumental in establishing the Ethiopian Council of Gospel Believers' Churches, an umbrella organization of Protestant churches.<sup>21</sup> Although Abiy's engagements with the Muslim community have similarly aimed at mending internal divisions, his efforts have indirectly and unintentionally affected intra-religious Muslim dynamics.

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21 This was an alternative to the existing Evangelical Churches' Fellowship of Ethiopia. Hausteina and Feyissa, 'The Strains of "Pente" Politics'.

# THE SALAFIS COME IN FROM THE COLD

Abiy Ahmed's involvement in the creation of a new EIASC was important in bringing previously marginalized Salafi actors in from the cold. In 2019, he gathered together members of the existing EIASC, representatives from the arbitration committee (leaders of the Muslim protests), and three 'neutral' persons to negotiate the formation of a new EIASC. A committee was tasked with securing the council's legal status, preparing its organizational structures and clarifying its ideological positions. Disagreements soon emerged over the council's structures and, in particular, its ideological framework, with the latter issue producing opposing 'Salafi' and 'Sufi' factions.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, a national conference was held in May 2019, attended by the prime minister, and a transitional council with equal Salafi and Sufi representation was established. Hajji Umar Idris from the Sufi side was elected president and Dr Jeylan Khedir, a prominent Salafi scholar, vice-president.

Tensions soon emerged within the transitional council as Hajji Umar Idris and the general secretary, Sheikh Kassim Tajudin, gradually usurped more and more power, marginalizing the Salafis and other opponents. The divisions within the council arose from both religious and ethnic differences, with Hajji Umar Idris's uncompromising character adding an element of personal conflict to the mix. Repeated attempts to solve the problem failed and appeals for government assistance were ignored. Eventually, in June 2022, Abiy Ahmed instructed the factions to hold a new national conference to reconcile the divisions. This conference was duly held on 18 July 2022, but was boycotted by Hajji Umar Idris and his Sufi faction. As a consequence, Hajji Umar Idris and Sheikh Kassim Tajudin were dismissed, and a new transitional council formed. Once again, attempts were made to balance the Salafi and Sufi factions, with Sheikh Hajji Ibrahim Tufa, an Oromo Salafi scholar, elected president and with Sheikh Abdulkerim Sheikh Badredin, the son of a famous Gurage Sufi leader, elected as vice-president.

The ouster of Hajji Umar Idris and the establishment of a new council has led to claims of a 'Salafi takeover' and Oromo domination.<sup>23</sup> Religious and ethnic divisions dovetail to some extent here, with Hajji Umar Idris and his Sufi followers largely Amharic-speaking Muslims from Wollo and Gondar, while the main Salafi leaders are Oromo. As such, some regard the

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22 Use of these terms is relatively recent in the Ethiopian context. While Sufi practices have a long history in Ethiopia, Sufism was not represented by large Sufi orders, as in West Africa. The term Salafi, meanwhile, has become more common as a self-referential category.

23 Interviews, Addis Ababa, 14 and 26 June 2022.



new council as evidence of Abiy Ahmed’s alleged attempt to elevate the position of the Oromo within Ethiopia.

While the situation is arguably more complex, the fact that the new council has reversed the religious balance between the two groups is important. By bringing in the Salafis, those who were previously perceived as extremist have entered the mainstream and been given a seat at the table. Conversely, the Sufis, previously assumed to be more tolerant, have been sidelined due to their uncooperative stance. This does not mean, however, that the Sufis have been silenced—as before, they continue to decry alleged Salafi dominance.

The entry of the Salafis to the EIASC represents a dramatic shift. Partly due to EPRDF’s policies of marginalizing them and, similarly importantly, because of the Salafis’ xenophobic attitudes, they had long been somewhat sequestered from the broader Muslim community and wider Ethiopian society. Again, the Muslim protests were instrumental in the Salafis’ change of course: the *al-Ahbash* campaign directly targeted the Salafis, prompting them to respond. The arbitration committee consisted of people with contrasting ideological backgrounds, including several Salafis—who were among those imprisoned. Leading figures, such as the previously mentioned Dr Jeylan Khedir, went public in denouncing the *al-Ahbash* campaign and the government’s interference in religious affairs. This engagement was important in enhancing the Salafis’ visibility, while their willingness to collaborate with Muslims holding different ideological viewpoints further increased their popularity. It may also be the case that the protests were an important learning experience for many Salafis, prompting them to rethink their isolationist positions.

The Salafis’ involvement in the EIASC leadership has moreover recast them as representatives of the entire Ethiopian Muslim community. Sheikh Ibrahim Tufa has become a highly public figure, engaging with the political authorities, broader civil society and non-Muslim religious leaders. The new council has, compared with the past, become far more active, putting itself forward as mediator in local conflicts—most recently the Somali–Afar conflict.<sup>24</sup> In contrast to the EOTC, the EIASC has taken a far more conciliatory approach to the Tigray conflict, with the main leadership travelling to Tigray in early February 2024 to offer words of apology for the former council’s failure to condemn the war and the violence.<sup>25</sup>

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24 Reports about these activities can be found on EIASC’s Facebook page: [www.facebook.com/eiasc](https://www.facebook.com/eiasc).

25 Reported on EIASC’s Facebook page: [www.facebook.com/eiasc/posts/pfbid027ZhXbMbqr2LLFbmeWpzFVAVVwQUdSmwu3uxEcVUorERmCcxkq247wsaCFVwXDmTGI](https://www.facebook.com/eiasc/posts/pfbid027ZhXbMbqr2LLFbmeWpzFVAVVwQUdSmwu3uxEcVUorERmCcxkq247wsaCFVwXDmTGI) (accessed 11 March 2024).

These shifts have also impacted the Salafis' ideological positions. While the Salafis' willingness to engage with the council in the first place indicated a more accommodating attitude, assuming leadership positions has forced them to revise earlier exclusivist stances and make compromises. All this demonstrates the malleability of Salafism as a movement. The messaging since the establishment of the new council in 2022 has been one of Islamic unity, with Sheikh Hajji Ibrahim Tufa describing Islam as 'a large tent with room for everyone'.<sup>26</sup>

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26 Statement by Sheikh Hajj Ibrahim Tufa during the press conference after the establishment of the new council.

# NEW ACTORS AND THE RE-ORIENTING OF RELIGIOUS IDEAS

Parallel to these developments and an integral part of the *Dimtsachen Yesima* generation has been the emergence of a new category of actors, commonly referred to as the *ustazes* ('teachers').<sup>27</sup> The *ustazes* are distinct from senior Salafi scholars, as few of them have any formal religious education and hence would not be referred to as 'sheikhs'. Most are activists with university degrees, earning their living as preachers, journalists and writers. In terms of religious knowledge, they are largely auto-didacts who have chosen to study Islamic theology and philosophy on their own.

While the *ustazes* emerged prior to the Muslim protests, it was the *Dimtsachen Yesima* movement that thrust them into the limelight. Key *ustazes* figures were part of the arbitration committee, and they remained highly visible throughout the protests. The imprisonment of the protest leaders in 2012 and the EPRDF's close monitoring of the Muslim community temporally affected their impact, although one of the *ustazes* managed to publish several books while in prison.<sup>28</sup> Soon after taking power, however, Abiy Ahmed released the protest leaders and publicly hugged them as if they were old friends. No longer viewed as extremists threatening Ethiopia's secular order, the *ustazes* were consequently given space to pursue their activism.

Few of the *ustazes* were initially familiar with political activism. As such, the Muslim protests constituted an important learning experience that helped shape their attitudes to societal and political engagement. The *ustazes* were different from Muslims who had thus far been active in public life as politicians or civil society leaders. Whereas these figures tended to downplay their Muslimness and refrain from framing their engagement within an Islamic paradigm, the *ustazes* explicitly presented themselves as Muslim activists. Their discourse was based on Islamic arguments, and they claimed space for themselves both as Ethiopians and Muslims. Deeply pious, they managed to engage in debates on non-religious issues while still being considered good Muslims. Here, it is important to note that they have avoided making references to an Islamic state or advocating for a political order based on religion. Acutely attuned to

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27 The word *ustaz* is often written as *ustadh*, but in this context the briefing uses the spelling common in Ethiopia.

28 These include *The Three Atse and Ethiopian Muslims* (2016) and *Pharaoh: A Precedent for Dictators* (2015).

contemporary Ethiopia's historical and political discourses, they have instead concerned themselves with economic development, inter-religious coexistence, promotion of democracy and civil rights. Several *ustazes* have established NGOs devoted to Muslim empowerment, inter-religious relations and socio-political engagement.<sup>29</sup>

The *ustazes* have thus become influential role models for Muslim youth, encouraging Muslims to contribute to all sectors of societal and political life. Social media has been pivotal for the *ustazes*' popularity and influence, with YouTube and Facebook the most popular channels for their messaging.<sup>30</sup> This use of social media has enabled them to reach audiences across the country, turning them into national celebrities. Social media has also become a crucial tool for young Muslims seeking to share their thoughts, its decentred, multi-directional nature allowing ideas to circulate without heed to gatekeepers. As such, it has now become an important religious public sphere.

The *ustazes* are not easily categorized ideologically and tend to hold a pragmatic attitude regarding ideological differences. Some have backgrounds as Salafis, while others are rooted in ideological currents associated with the Muslim Brotherhood. They have also put forward a critique of Salafi teaching, albeit in a subtle manner. One important aspect of this criticism is their claim that issues related to ritual purity need to be contextualized. As one informant explained: 'now we are advocating for the revision of the Salafi curriculum, seeking to reinterpret and customize some of its content. We realize how important the local context is and believe that the rules about social aspects need to be changed'.<sup>31</sup> This is contrary to the central aspect of Salafism, namely that everything practiced during the time of the Prophet should be regarded as timeless Islamic imperatives.<sup>32</sup> Another informant argued that 'Salafism is not one thing, it has changed throughout history ... it changes, this is the nature of things, and you cannot hinder that'.<sup>33</sup>

While senior Salafis continue to be respected as *shimageles* (elders), their followings have dwindled. As a result, the Salafis no longer have a monopoly on religious knowledge. While many senior Salafis find this erosion of authority disconcerting, they have been careful not to

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29 Relevant examples include the Impact Makers led by Ahmedin Jebel and the Center for National and Regional Integration Studies led by Ibrahim Mulushewa.

30 See, for example, Bedru Hussein's YouTube channel: [www.youtube.com/channel/UCluqbaJevNbnV256ooch8WQ](http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCluqbaJevNbnV256ooch8WQ) (accessed 12 November 2022). Raya Abbamacha has 1.2 million followers, Ahmedin Jebel over 900,000 followers, Abubakr Ahmed approximately 500,000 followers, Kamil Shamsu over 400,000 followers, and Yasin Nuru around 360,00 followers on Facebook.

31 Interview, Addis Ababa, 21 August 2022.

32 One example is key Salafi marker of public piety, *isbal*, or the shortening of one's trousers above the ankle. The Salafis argue this was prescribed by the Prophet and is therefore a mandatory practice. The counter-argument is that this shortening of one's trousers is no longer necessary in a changed historical context.

33 Interview, Addis Ababa, 17 March 2023.

confront the *ustazes*, knowing all too well that this could further weaken their position. Instead, many have adopted a more conciliatory attitude. A good example of the religious negotiations arising from this relates to the celebration of *mawlid al-nabi*—Prophet Muhammad’s birthday—which has become increasingly popular in Ethiopia. Despite Salafis having vehemently opposed *mawlid al-Nabi* celebrations in the past, the new EIASC—including its Salafi leaders—has now taken it upon itself to organize the celebrations. Sheikh Hajji Ibrahim Tufa, EIASC’s president, has even issued statements underscoring the importance of *mawlid* and sent his best wishes to the celebrants.<sup>34</sup>

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34 ‘The Supreme Council of Ethiopian Islamic Affairs sent a best wish message marking the Mawlid Holiday’, Facebook, 8 October 2022. [www.facebook.com/watch/?v=5461195510637756](https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=5461195510637756).



# ETHIOPIAN MUSLIMS AND INTER-RELIGIOUS RELATIONS

Over the past decade or so, Ethiopia has witnessed increased inter-religious tensions and conflict. While most of these have had a local character, violence in one part of the country has led to spillover clashes in other areas.<sup>35</sup> It is here important to understand how conflicts are a product of dynamics within each of the different religious communities—having reciprocal impacts on relations between them.<sup>36</sup>

While the spectre of extremism as a perceived political threat remains, it is interesting to note how references to the relative influence of the different religions have become more common. At various times, Muslims, Protestants and Orthodox Christians have all complained that another religious community is gaining too much power, and that they are the victims of a ‘takeover’. This has become more explicit following the rise to power of Abiy Ahmed, who is seen as deliberately strengthening certain communities at the expense of others.

Orthodox Christians have been upset by the changing religious landscape wrought by a more visible Muslim community and the growth of Protestantism. The *Mahibere Kidusan*—which emerged as an Orthodox reform movement in the late 1980s devoted to protecting the youth from Marxism and Protestantism—have grown in strength over recent decades, playing a significant role in breaking out of a so-called Orthodox ‘siege mentality’.<sup>37</sup> These attempts at reclaiming perceived lost influence are demonstrated by the fact that Orthodox Christian youth have taken to adorning t-shirts with religious statements during Orthodox holidays such as *timket* (Epiphany).<sup>38</sup> Since the early 2000s, *timket* celebrations have become more elaborate,

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- 35 Yihewnew Alemu Tesfaye and Fasika Gedif, ‘Religious Conflict in Gondar: Local Perceptions on Polarization and Peace-Building’ Rift Valley Institute, 2023; Kedir Jema, ‘Religion and Conflict in Dire Dawa: Intercommunal Tensions and Opportunities for Peace’, Rift Valley Institute, 2023; Jörg Haustein, ‘Religious Polarization in Ethiopia: Urban Conflicts and Resources for Peace’, Rift Valley Institute, 2023.
- 36 Terje Østebø, ‘Religious Dynamics and Conflicts in Contemporary Ethiopia: Expansion, Protection, and Reclaiming Space’, *African Studies Review* 66/3 (2023): 721–724.
- 37 Dereje Feyissa, ‘Accommodation, Tolerance or Forbearance? The Politics of Representing Ethiopia’s Religious Past’, paper presented at the 4th European Conference on African Studies, Uppsala, 14–18 June 2011.
- 38 Such include statements include: ‘We will preserve our first religion to the end’, ‘Ethiopia is a Christian Island’, and ‘One Lord, one religion, one baptism’. Meron Zeleke, ‘Cosmopolitan Youth Religious Movements in Ethiopia: Ethiopian Orthodox Tawahedo Youth as Vanguard and Self-Appointed Masters of Ceremony’ *Northeast African Studies* 15/2 (2015): 65–92.

with thousands of young volunteers decorating public spaces with flags, posters and other ornaments related to the Orthodox faith. Moreover, streets in Addis Ababa and other major cities have had to be closed-off for hours during processions. Dire Dawa, Harar and Burayu, just outside Addis Ababa, saw violent conflicts during *timket* celebrations between 2019 and 2022, which left several people dead and property destroyed.<sup>39</sup>

In the lead-up to the 2021 Grand *Iftar* event, the EOTC issued a letter asking the Addis Ababa administration to block the event, arguing that the celebration could provoke Christians and lead to conflict.<sup>40</sup> The following year, in the wake of a Protestant fundraising event for victims of the war in northern Ethiopia at Addis Ababa's Mesqel Square, the EOTC asserted that the square was Orthodox and no other religious groups should be allowed to use it.<sup>41</sup> Meanwhile, during the 2022 celebration of *timket*, a senior EOTC clergy member proclaimed that: 'No one should aim to be equal to Orthodox Church, because none of the other religions, since their emergence in this country, contributed for the establishment and growth of Ethiopia as much as our church did'.<sup>42</sup>

Many Orthodox Christians regard Protestantism's growth and Islam's increased presence as marking a departure from a time where other religions were confined on the margins. This reversal of past asymmetric inter-religious relations is seen by many Orthodox Christians as eroding peaceful coexistence. As a result, the EOTC and Orthodox Christian community have become more assertive in promoting a national religious narrative whereby Ethiopia's history and culture are presented as inherently Orthodox, and so in need of preservation in the face of other religions' attempts to redefine the nation.

The coherence of the EOTC has, however, been challenged in recent years by the proposed formation of a separate Tigrayan Orthodox Church, which caused a significant fracture within the church, and attempts to create a separate Oromo Synod. The ongoing insurgency in the Amhara region and the Fano movement's affiliation to Orthodox Christianity have further complicated the situation. It has become clear that the EOTC is not immune to ethno-nationalist divisions, and the full consequences of which are as yet unclear.

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39 Kedir Jemal, 'Religion and Conflict'; Østebø, 'Religious Dynamics'.

40 A facsimile of the letter is available here: <https://addisstandard.com/news-analysis-muslim-clerics-demand-accountability-after-security-crackdown-on-participants-of-planned-grand-iftar-deputy-mayor-apologizes/> (accessed 28 May 2021).

41 Østebø, 'Religious Dynamics'.

42 'The Priest's Speech that Shocked Abiy Ahmed and Adanech Abebe', YouTube, 18 January 2022. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=dmkbW6kT-wE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dmkbW6kT-wE) (accessed 29 January 2022, but not defunct).

# CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In recent decades, Ethiopian Muslims have become more visible and confident, leading to—in a break from the past—greater engagement with broader Ethiopian society. The Muslim protests revealed the changes taking place among young urban Muslims, with the *Dimtsachen Yesima* generation increasingly enrolling in higher education and joining the workforce. In doing so, they are negotiating how to be pious in a broader Ethiopian context—in other words, how to be both good Muslims and good citizens.

The *Dimtsachen Yesima* generation has also grown tired of what they see as the Salafis' narrow focus on ritual purity, which fails to address questions pertinent to their lives. This has prompted senior Salafis to adjust some of their exclusivist positions, a process accelerated by their entry to the EIASC, where they are meant to represent the Muslim community as a whole. Their authority has also been challenged by an emerging category of actors—the *ustazes*—who are more attuned to the *Dimtsachen Yesima* generation's needs.

In sum, the past decade or so has seen intra-religious discourses within Ethiopia's Muslim community—particularly in Addis Ababa—that cannot easily be placed in simple ideological categories. Rather, the de-centred nature of Islam in Ethiopia has produced an inherently dynamic situation. What is clear, however, is that relying on extremism as an analytical category is increasingly unhelpful when it comes to properly understanding what is going on. Instead, Islam in Ethiopia demonstrates that religious reform does not necessarily follow a teleological trajectory of moderate to extreme.

Based on the above, this briefing makes the following recommendations:

- **Observers should refrain from relying on an exclusively Islamic extremism lens when attempting to understand Ethiopia's Muslim community.** Islam in Ethiopia is very different from, for example, neighbouring Somalia, with key Muslim actors in Ethiopia making significant efforts to empower the Muslim population while also promoting a sense of belonging to broader Ethiopian society. Thus, continued use of the 'extremist' label is only likely to alienate Muslims from constructive societal engagement.
- **Inter-religious violence should be understood as the product of a changing religious landscape.** Here, it is important to recognize that an increasingly visible,



confident Muslim community and a proselytizing Protestant community are unsettling for Orthodox Christians, potentially prompting violence as a response.

- **While ethnic-based violence remains a grave concern, developments within Ethiopia's religious communities should also be taken into account.** Conflicts perceived as ethnically driven are in fact often the product of how ethnicity and religion intersect, meaning lack of attention to the latter can reduce understanding of the former, as well as conflict dynamics in general.
- **Ethiopian and international stakeholders should engage with the Muslim community beyond the EIASC.** Although the decentred, informal nature of Ethiopia's Muslim community makes this a complicated task, efforts should be made to map out influential actors.
- **Efforts should be made to produce in-depth studies that offer grounded, nuanced insights into dynamics within the Muslim community** (as well as within other religious communities). The multifaceted nature of Ethiopia's Muslim population means particular attention should be paid to the contrasting discourses taking place in different localities.



# ABBREVIATIONS

<b>EIASC</b>	Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council
<b>EOTC</b>	Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church
<b>EPRDF</b>	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
<b>NGO</b>	non-governmental organization



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