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USCIRF deeply concerned by emerging religious freedom violations in Ethiopia

United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) (09.11.2012) - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom is deeply concerned about the increasing deterioration of religious freedoms for Muslims in Ethiopia. Since July 2011, the Ethiopian government has sought to force a change in the sect of Islam practiced nationwide and has punished clergy and laity who have resisted. Muslims throughout Ethiopia have been arrested during peaceful protests: On October 29, the Ethiopia government charged 29 protestors with terrorism and attempting to establish an Islamic state.

"These charges are only the latest and most concerning attempt by the Ethiopian government to crush opposition to its efforts to control the practice of religion by imposing on Ethiopian Muslims a specific interpretation of Islam," said USCIRF Commissioner Azizah al-Hibri. "The individuals charged were among tens of thousands peacefully protesting the government's violations of international standards and their constitutional right to religious freedom. The Ethiopian government should cease interfering in the internal affairs of its Muslim community and immediately and unconditionally release those wrongfully imprisoned."

Since July 2011, the Ethiopian government has sought to impose the al-Ahbash Islamic sect on the country's Muslim community, a community that traditionally has practiced the Sufi form of Islam. The government also has manipulated the election of the new leaders of the Ethiopia Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC). Previously viewed as an independent body, EIASC is now viewed as a government-controlled institution. The arrests, terrorism charges and takeover of EIASC signify a troubling escalation in the government's attempts to control Ethiopia's Muslim community and provide further evidence of a decline in religious freedom in Ethiopia.

"The U.S. government should raise with the new leadership in Addis Ababa the importance of abiding by Ethiopia's own constitution and international standards on freedom of religion of belief. USCIRF has found that repressing religious communities in the name of countering extremism leads to more extremism, greater instability, and possibly violence," said USCIRF Chair Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett. "Given Ethiopia's strategic importance in the Horn of Africa and that Muslims account for more than one-third of all Ethiopians, it is vital that the Ethiopian government end its religious freedom abuses and allow Muslims to practice peacefully their faith as they see fit. Otherwise, the government's current policies and practices will lead to greater destabilization of an already volatile region."

Background

Ethiopian Muslims traditionally are Sufis. Article 27 of the Ethiopian constitution guarantees religious freedom and "the independence of the state from religion."

However, due to a concern about the rise of Wahhabism in Ethiopia, the government in July 2011 brought al-Ahbash imams from Lebanon to train Ethiopian imams and Islamic school educators on that sect's beliefs to teach their students and worshippers. The government dismissed from their positions those who refused to be trained in or teach al-Ahbash and closed mosques and schools. Beginning in December 2011, protests have been held almost every Friday outside of mosques after prayers. While these demonstrations have taken place nationwide, they are centered at the Awalia Mosque and Islamic school in Addis Ababa.

As the protests continued, an Arbitration Committee of 17 Islamic leaders was created this past spring to negotiate with the government about: 1) respecting the Ethiopian constitution's guarantees of religious freedom; 2) ending government imposition of al-Ahbash on Ethiopian Muslims, while allowing al-Ahbash to operate equally with other religious communities; 3) re-opening and returning schools and mosques to their original imams and administrators; and 4) holding new elections for the EIASC, and having these elections take place in mosques, rather than in neighborhood government community centers, to ensure that the community's selections would be honored.

By July, the negotiations had failed and the protests increased in both size and frequency. In response, the Ethiopian government started to crack down on and intimidate the demonstrators, surrounding them with armed guards and conducting house-to-house searches. Between July 13 and 21, the government arrested all 17 members of the Arbitration Committee and at least 70 protestors. (While the government has confirmed 70 people were arrested, demonstrators place the number in the hundreds). Human rights organizations reported that the police used excessive force against individuals during the arrests and while in detention. While many were released after being held for a short time, nine of the Arbitration Committee members remain in jail.

The charges the government leveled on October 29 were the first issued against any of the arrested protestors, including the nine Arbitration Committee members who were not released with their colleagues in July. The individuals charged were first detained and held in Maikelwai federal police detention center, which frequently houses political prisoners and is known for abusing prisoners, including torturing them during interrogations. The individuals detained also were charged under the nation's anti-terror law which has been used to target dissent, rather than to stop terrorism.

Protestors now hold up yellow or white placards to signal that they are peaceful and to condemn the arrests and charges. While the demonstrations largely have been peaceful, there have been a few violent incidents: On October 21, 2011 four Muslims were killed as they stormed a jail attempting to free protestors and in April 2012 five people were killed protesting the dismissal of an imam who refused to propagate al-Ahbash.

Muslims accuse Ethiopian government of meddling in mosques

Ethiopia's Muslims have been protesting 'state interference' in their affairs for the past six months. Could government accusations of Muslim extremism risk greater tension?

CSM (31.05.2012) - Protests at mosques in religiously-diverse Ethiopia have stretched into their sixth month as Muslims object to what they see as unconstitutional government interference in their affairs.

Since December, worshipers at Friday prayers nationwide have been criticizing the state's alleged attempts to impose the al Ahbash, a moderate sect of Islam, on the community via an unrepresentative, politicized Islamic Supreme Affairs Council. Officials deny any interference.

The protest movement in most major cities among the nation's 30 to 40 million Muslims – about one-third of Ethiopia's population – has been largely peaceful and contained to mosque compounds.

The government is trying to dominate influential mosques to gain wider political control of the country, says Ethiopian political analyst Jawar Mohammed. To solidify Western support, it's playing up an Islamist threat – Ethiopia is widely perceived by strategists as a bulwark against Al Qaeda-affiliated Islamic terrorists across the border in Somalia and in the Middle East and North Africa.

"It is an unnecessary, unwise, and untimely intervention that will have severe repercussions both for the current regime as well as for the country in the long run, unless the government reverses its current approach," says Mr. Jawar.

The most serious incident occurred on April 27 in the southeast town of Asasa in the Oromia region, when four people died in clashes after police arrested a Muslim preacher. The government said the preacher had been trying to instigate jihad. Earlier in April, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi told parliament that an Al Qaeda cell containing "a few Salafist extremists" operated in the area, while at the beginning of May the government announced it deported two Arabs of unspecified nationalities for trying to incite violence outside Addis Ababa's largest mosque.

A focal point for the dispute has been at the community centered around the Awalia Mission School on the edge of the capital, where 50 Arabic teachers were removed via a letter from the Islamic council leaders, leading to the escalation of protests against the leaders' legitimacy and state interference.

The government has tightened security at mosques – it is difficult for Western journalist to report from those in the capital without police interference. The Ministry of Federal Affairs recently accused the protesters of being extremists engaged in violence and collaborating with foreign forces to instigate jihad.

Growing radicalism?

The Ethiopian government has recently claimed that radicalism is growing in Ethiopia, citing austere Wahhabism promulgated by foreign preachers in mosques built by well-heeled Saudi organizations. Ahmedin Jebel, spokesman for a committee that says it's elected by Muslims to represent the movement, says these claims are way off the mark. Although there may be individual extremists, there are no communities sworn to conflict, he says. Conversely, according to Mr. Ahmedin, the government risks creating extremism where it doesn't exist with heavy-handed actions that many Muslims perceive as an attack on Islam.

"We are afraid that people will begin to fight back," if the indoctrination and smear campaigns continue, he says. "There is a concern that they may create more extremism than they fear."

Leaked US diplomatic cables from 2008 corroborate the Ethiopian government's concerns about a "growing Wahhabi influence." In the cables, American officials discuss programs to combat its influence, such as translating "The Place of Tolerance in Islam" – a book by American Muslim scholar Khaled Abou el Fadl – into local languages.

Activists dismiss the dispatches as hyperbolic, countering that the Islamic council was just fear-mongering to embassy staff. "Money coming from Saudi Arabia or any other country doesn't mean adopting that school of thought," they argue. They claim that council leaders are using a phony battle against extremism to cement their positions.

Training sessions

According to Ahmedin, the problems began ten months ago when the Federal Affairs Ministry and the Islamic council brought in Lebanese preachers from the Al Ahabash sect – which was founded by an Ethiopian but became popular in Lebanon – to deliver training to around 1,300 employees of the council's branches at Haramaya University in eastern Ethiopia.

Following the training session, a senior Lebanese teacher, Samir Kadi, thanked Meles and Federal affairs minister Shiferaw Teklemariam at a recorded press conference for inviting them. That, Ahmedin says, proves that the government is behind the campaign.

In response, Meles said to lawmakers the training program had nothing to do with al Ahabash, but was about the rights and duties of religions in Ethiopia under the constitution.

Since the Haramaya conference, the Islamic council – which opponents say has been co-opted by the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front for almost two decades – has coerced 50,000 people to undergo the training, which aims to incorporate teachings from Al Ahabash into religious schools across the nation and attacks all other doctrines as anti-Islamic, they say.

Non-participation results in punishment: Imams have been sacked and many Muslim youths arrested for not participating in trainings, critics allege. The community is rife with rumors that the US bankrolled the campaign, which offers per diems of up to 500 birr (\$28) to attendees.

"Even if we agree of the threat of Islamic extremism in Ethiopia, this is not the correct way to solve the problem," said Ahmedin.

The government rejects the allegations, also saying that protesters want them to unconstitutionally ban al Ahabash. The allegation of imposing the sect "ignores the fact that the government has no right to invite, allow or forbid any religion or sect, provided that the exercise is within the framework of the constitution," said the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on April 27. In eight letters to the government, the committee never asked for the sect to be banned, Ahmedin responds.

Why the resistance to al Ahabash?

According to the constitution, the government has no business interfering in religious affairs; Ahmedin says the Al Ahabash sect is alien to Ethiopian Muslims despite its origins; and some doctrines of al Ahabash are unacceptable to many followers. For example, it permits believers to receive interest in transactions with non-Muslims; fornication with non-Muslims is also accepted.

Analyst Jawar suggests al Ahabash's controversial history is reason enough for people to object to its promotion. Its pro-Israel leanings and its founder's attacks on "well-respected" Islamic scholars created furious opposition, he says.

"I think what aroused the Muslim population at large is al Ahabash's aggressive 'moderation' approach that emphasizes assimilation," he says. "But let's say the sect is moderate as it claims – still it is not wise to drag its huge controversy into the country."

Government reaction to independence

Since a democratic constitution was adopted in 1995, Ethiopian Muslims have been asserting their independence, and the government is reacting poorly to that, say activists. Prior to the modern era that enshrined religious freedom, Muslims had to accommodate their beliefs during imperial times when Christian emperors ruled the land, or suppress them during the Marxist totalitarianism of Mengistu Hailemariam's military Derg regime in the 1980s.

In decades past, followers of the Prophet Muhammed's teachings in Ethiopia would engage in processions of Orthodox Christians – the most populous faith in the country – and assist in building churches. Some Muslims in Ethiopia's northern Wollo region still get crosses tattooed on their forehead, an indicator of centuries of cultural assimilation.

Salafism has grown in Ethiopia, but there is "zero influence from foreign extremists" on an almost exclusively moderate community, according to the pair of activists. Even "hard-liner" Ethiopian Salafi preachers denounce Al Qaeda's former leader Osama Bin Laden as an unbeliever, they say.

Ethiopia's protesting Muslims want to practice their religion and select their new leaders without interference, in line with the country's constitution, the activists say. "Let us be free," they argue. "Let us have our own organization that is led by ourselves, not government cadres." New government plans to hold non-transparent elections for council leaders controlled by the authorities will not be accepted by the community, Ahmedin says.

Because of Ethiopia's proximity to hotbeds of extreme Islam, "it is rather understandable that the Ethiopian government would be concerned about who is engaging in religious activities and what these individuals may be preaching," says J. Peter Pham, director of the Michael S. Ansari Africa Center at the Atlantic Council in Washington.
