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Muslim protests raise slender hopes of change in Ethiopia

Deutsche Welle (09.08.2013) - Muslims in Ethiopia staged protests to coincide with the end of Ramadan. The opposition joined them. Both criticize the government for carrying out arbitrary arrests.

Muslims in Ethiopia are angry over the detention of 29 religious leaders and activists and are calling for their release. They believe they have been wrongly accused of terrorism.

Speaking to DW, Claire Beston, an expert on Ethiopia at Amnesty International said "we think that these people are persecuted because they got themselves involved in a peaceful protest movement."

"We have seen that the Muslim protest movement which has been active for more than 18 months, continues to be subjected to a massive oppression," Beston added.

Muslims are in the minority in mainly Christian dominated Ethiopia, but they have been in the country for more than a thousand years and now make up at least a third of the population. The constitution says religion and the state should be kept apart.

Some Muslims are outraged because they believe the government is violating constitution by giving financial support to the moderate Islamic group "Al-Ahbash." The government, they say, is forcing moderate religious education on the country. They also accuse the government of meddling in the appointment of key figures in Ethiopia's supreme Islamic council.

Under the guise of fighting terrorism

Confrontation between security forces and protesters is frequent. According to government figures, last Saturday's (03.08.2013) protest left three people dead. Eyewitnesses and bloggers, however, say that dozens were killed that day. The Ethiopian police claimed that Salafists coordinated the protests.

"The government says there is a link between the Muslim protest movement and terrorism," said Beston. "It also says the same about other political parties and protest movements in the country," she added. Political activists are repeatedly detained under the pretext of being suspected terrorists.

The government says it is acting in accordance with the law on combating terrorism, which came into force in 2009. That law says any one who makes statements or remarks which can be construed as encouraging terrorist acts will be punished by up to 20 years in jail.

Human rights activists have been complaining for years that this law is open to broad interpretation and can therefore be easily misused to restrict personal liberty. In 2012 the German Heinrich Boell Foundation closed down its offices in Addis Ababa in protest at the worsening of human rights situation in Ethiopia.

A glimmer of hope

Over the last few weeks, political opposition groups and Muslims have been protesting against arbitrary arrests. The opposition "Blue Party", which has a large youth following, is calling for a liberal democracy. In early June, the party organized a large demonstration in the capital Addis Ababa, which was attended by thousands of people.

Unlike previous years, the autocratic state's authorities let the protests go ahead . According to Hallelujah Lule, who works at the Institute for Security Studies in Addis Ababa, the demonstrators had shrewdly chosen the right time for their rally. "The first demonstration took place a few days after the 50th anniversary of the African Union." According to Lule, the government had initially allowed the protests in order to avoid upsetting the international celebrations.

But then the demonstrations spread to the northern Ethiopian cities of Gondar and Dessie. There they were also permitted to proceed. Nevertheless, it is too early to assume that the government is now open to reform, says security expert Lule.

The organizers of the protests are always being subjected to pressure and threats. Speaking to DW, Yilkal Getnet, the chairman of the Blue Party, said he has been receiving anonymous threatening phone calls. "They rang several numbers telling us we should stop criticizing the government." But Getnet says he is not prepared to be intimidated. "We are always in danger, but we are ready to do everything to defend our rights."

Protesting against the political leadership in Ethiopia was until recently unthinkable. In 2005 the government of former Prime Minister Meles Zenawi launched a violent crackdown on public protest sparking an exodus of dissidents. Now that the opposition can afford to make itself heard, shows there is a glimmer of hope, commented Hallelujah Lule.
