

## ***Setting a Social Reform Agenda***

*The Peacebuilding Dimension of the Rights Movement of the Ethiopian Muslims Diaspora*

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## Content

1. Introduction .....	4
2. Legal framework for diasporic action in Ethiopia .....	5
3. The conceptual framework – revisiting long distance nationalism.....	8
4. Major religious groups in Ethiopia.....	10
5. The socio-political marginalization of Islam in Ethiopia.....	12
6. Religious reforms in Ethiopia .....	14
7. Enduring constraints to Muslims’ rights in Ethiopia.....	16
<i>Securitization of Islam.....</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>The caveat put on organizational expression of Islam in Ethiopia.....</i>	<i>18</i>
<i>Limits to public expression of Islamic faith in Ethiopia.....</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>Lack of consensus on secularism.....</i>	<i>20</i>
<i>Sectarian divisions.....</i>	<i>21</i>
8. The peace building activities of the Ethiopian Muslims diaspora.....	22
<i>Re-narrating the nation on inclusive basis.....</i>	<i>26</i>
<i>Calling for a legitimate and functional Muslim organization.....</i>	<i>28</i>
<i>Contesting assertive secularism.....</i>	<i>30</i>
<i>Resolving religious conflicts .....</i>	<i>32</i>
9. Conclusion .....	35
References.....	37

## 1. Introduction

This working paper examines the impact of the Ethiopian Muslims in the diaspora on socio-political processes in the homeland, with a special focus on their activities that have a bearing on peace-building. Within the DIASPEACE the research project falls within Working Package 3 (WP3) that focuses on the economic, social and political remittances of the diaspora from the Horn of Africa in Europe to their respective homelands.

Ethiopia has one of the largest diaspora populations in the world. The exact number of the Ethiopian diaspora is not yet known, but it is widely believed that over half a million Ethiopians live in North America and Europe (Lyons 2006). The Ethiopian diaspora remittance in 2010 was estimated at 387 million USD (World Bank 2010). The push factor for many of the Ethiopian diaspora was the violent political conflicts of the 1970s, when the military socialist government (Derg) ruthlessly suppressed political organizations that called for political change. Squeezed out of the homeland political space, the Ethiopians in the diaspora had contested the totalitarian state from afar. Apart from the economic remittances - crucial in sustaining families during the economic deprivations under the strenuous planned socialist economy - the diaspora actively funded rebel groups at home. The Tigrean People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the dominant political organization within the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), had a strong diaspora backing during its armed struggle against the Derg in the 1980s.

The political engagement of the diaspora continued unabated after the EPRDF took control over the reins of government in 1991. The opposition has continued because the diaspora consists of a wide spectrum of political opinion ranging from 'centrists' who oppose the new political order in Ethiopia - ethnic federalism - to ethnonationalists who still call for the genuine implementation of ethnic rights. As of late, the government has also sought to create its own diaspora consistency. Towards that end, it has initiated a series of laws and directives to better 'govern' the structurally elusive diaspora. Towards that end, the government established the General Directorate in Charge of Ethiopian Expatriate Affairs in 2002.

The origin of the Ethiopian Muslims in the diaspora is part of the wider Ethiopian diaspora population which has been mobilized by the various political organizations at various times. Its religious mobilization is a recent phenomenon, which dates back to the late 1990s and has become vocal during and since the May 2005 election in which religious identity figured prominently in the rhetoric of the political parties that participated in the election. The rise of inter-faith conflicts in Ethiopia since 2006 has also led to the proliferation of Ethiopian Muslims diaspora organizations. These diaspora organizations were brought into two major umbrella organizations; the US-based Badr-Ethiopia established in 2002 (hereafter Badr), and the Network of Ethiopian Muslims in Europe established in 2004 (here after the Network). Both Badr and the Network advocate for the socio-political rights of Ethiopian Muslims which, in their perspective, is part of the wider agenda of reforming the Ethiopian polity. Failure to do so, reason these organizations, could well endanger the very survival of the nation.

Various scholars have also noted the steadily increasing role of religion and inter-faith conflicts in defining the terms of political debate in Ethiopia, which has hitherto been dominated by ethnicity. Medhane (2003: 1) wrote, 'religious institutions and inter-religious relations will, in the coming decades, gradually and perhaps inescapably become a thorny issue of national political life and a fundamental source of conflict. [As a result], the fault lines between religions will be the battle lines of the future in Ethiopia'. Other scholars, on the other hand, espouse the need to continue and deepen the reform agenda while recognizing some appreciable changes made in the quest for social justice in Ethiopia for the last three decades. In this regard Bahru (2008: 64) noted that 'it is true that we have made significant progress in realizing the quest for equality, both between religions and nationalities ... But the challenges that remain are not negligible. In the religious sphere, the great challenge is fostering a culture of mutual tolerance. This is a matter of national survival, for the alternative is a clash of fundamentalisms that make the class struggle and ethnic clashes of the past child's play'. The 2006 religious violence between Christians and Muslims in Jimma, Illubabaor, Begi (Wollega) and Kemisse as well as the 2008/9 clashes in Gondar, Addis Ababa, Arsi and Dessie (Wello) are indicative of the explosive nature of the underlying interfaith tension in the country.

The paper examines how the Ethiopian Muslim diaspora organizations have contributed to religious peacebuilding and to the democratization of the Ethiopian polity through non-violent means of asserting religious rights. The paper is divided into seven sections. Section one presents the legal framework for diasporic actions in Ethiopia. Section two introduces the analytical framework within which the rights movement of the Ethiopian Muslim diaspora is made intelligible. After critiquing the notion of 'long distance nationalism', the paper calls for a more differentiated view of the diaspora and cautions the casual use of the term 'conflict' as a negative label by indicating its potential transformative power. Section three provides an overview of the major religious groups in Ethiopia. Section four briefly summarizes the socio-political marginalization of Islam in Ethiopia. Section five discusses religious reforms in Ethiopia, with a special reference to the new fields of possibilities for Muslims as citizens while at the same time pointing out the enduring constraints. Section six describes at length and analyses the activities of the Ethiopian Muslim diaspora. Section seven makes concluding remarks on the Ethiopian Muslims rights movement - of which the diaspora is part - with a special reference to its peacebuilding dimensions.

## **2. The Legal framework for diasporic actions in Ethiopia- Possibilities and limits**

The current Ethiopian government was initially hostile to the diaspora in general and its involvement in the political process in the homeland in particular. Two diaspora based political organizations - the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and the All Ethiopian Socialist Movement (AESM) - were excluded from the transitional government (1991-1994) on the ground that they had to renounce armed struggle as a condition (Alem 2010). Embittered by their exclusions, these diaspora political organizations were engaged in virulent discursive attacks on the EPRDF. Consequently, the majority of the

diaspora was excluded from a meaningful political participation in the homeland. Increasingly aware of the role of the diaspora in setting the tone of the discourse and the terms of the political debate in the homeland; their link with the opposition parties, and eager to mobilize the diaspora for development in the homeland, the government has gradually changed its attitude towards the diaspora (Lyons 2009). Instead of putting all the diaspora into one box, the government has started making a distinction between what it calls 'the silent majority' that could potentially play a constructive role in the development process and the so-called 'few extremists' who are defined as spoilers of the country's peace and development. To reach out 'the silent majority' the government has, through its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, created the General Directorate in charge of Ethiopian Expatriate Affairs (EEA) in January 2002. The aims of EEA are defined by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as follows<sup>1</sup>:

- To liaison between different ministries and Ethiopians in the diaspora
- To encourage the active involvement of Ethiopians in the diaspora in the socio-economic activities of the country
- To safeguard the rights and privileges of Ethiopian expatriates
- To mobilize the Ethiopian community abroad for a sustained and organized image-building.

Based on these objectives EEA's major activities are targeted towards:

- Disseminating accurate information to the Ethiopian community abroad through various media outlets
- Conducting research, which helps in identifying problems of the Ethiopians in the diaspora, in order to improve legislation that is instrumental for the increased participation in nation building
- Ensuring the well being, safety and security as well as the rights and privileges of Ethiopians abroad, and
- Keeping the diaspora informed of issues relevant to them.

Although the response of the diaspora is mixed, the EEA has at least managed to persuade a section of the diaspora to invest in the homeland. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the diaspora has so far invested over 17 billion birr in various sectors<sup>2</sup>. The EEA has also offered special benefit packages for the diaspora who want to resettle in the country such as duty free importation of vehicles and other personal effects as well as free land to build personal houses. These inducements are of a high value given the current inflated land market and the high tariffs on imported cars. In 2008 the government also created Ethiopia's first diaspora bond to enable the diaspora to invest in the country's hydro-electric megaprojects. This bond will provide funds to the

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.mfa.gov.et/Ethiopians\\_Origin\\_Abroad/Ethiopia\\_Origin.php](http://www.mfa.gov.et/Ethiopians_Origin_Abroad/Ethiopia_Origin.php).

<sup>2</sup> Ethiopian Television and Radio Broadcasting, December 21, 2009.

Ethiopian Electric Power Corporation for investments which will increase power supply for the nation, where only 27 per cent of the people have currently access to electricity<sup>3</sup>.

The government on the other hand is very anxious to contain the 'negative' influence of the 'extremist' diaspora especially since the contested May 2005 national election in which the diaspora played a crucial role in the meritorious rise of the opposition parties. The opposition, which posed a formidable challenge to the EPRDF, had a significant backing by the diaspora (Lyons 2009). Subsequently, the EPRDF promulgated two laws that aim at controlling the influence of the diaspora over the political process. These are the law which bans political parties accepting foreign 'donation' and the Charities and Societies Law that defines the mandates and regulates the activities of civil society organizations (CSOs). The 2009 Civil Society Proclamation has brought about a drastic change in CSOs-government relations and limits the former's mandate and role in the development process and peacebuilding. A charity/society is deemed Ethiopian only if three conditions are fulfilled: it should be formed and controlled by Ethiopians; it must get at least 90 per cent of its assets from Ethiopians and it must be formed in accordance with Ethiopian Law. The NGOs which are based in Ethiopia, but receive more than 10 per cent of their funding from international sources are termed "resident" organizations. Only local Ethiopian charities and societies can work on activities related to human rights, good governance, gender equality, children's rights, conflict resolution, and the efficiency of the justice sector. From the government perspective the law is necessary to curb foreign 'encroachment' into national sovereignty and ensure financial accountability of the CSOs. Many in the CSOs community and the international human right organizations, on the other hand, regard the law as a repressive instrument whose objective is political control of the voluntary sector; yet another instance of the drive towards total control over society that underpins EPRDF's 'developmental state' and its 'revolutionary democracy'.

The 2009 CSO proclamation limits the extent to which diaspora organizations can directly affect the socio-political process at home. The impact of this new legislation is already felt by the CSOs. While the countdown of the one year grace period is closing in, some CSOs are desperately trying to reinvent their organization as 'resident organization'. Others have already experienced closure for 'transgressing' the law of the land<sup>4</sup>. Ethiopian Muslims diaspora organizations have also felt the impact of the new legislation. Despite the government's promise to the Ethiopian Muslims diaspora delegation in 2007 - allowing them to open an office in the country - they were later on informed that they could only do that if they reorient their activities away from the rights advocacy, to which the 'foreign' CSOs are not entitled, to 'development' activities since many members of the diapsora carry 'foreign passport' and are registered in their host

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<sup>3</sup> The government guaranteed bond will be issued for a minimum denomination of US \$500, maturing in five, seven or ten years with interest rates of 4 %, 4.5 % and 5 %, respectively. The interest earned will be free of income tax (<http://www.combanketh.com/bond.php>).

<sup>4</sup> More than 40 CSOs were banned by the regional government of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State in August 2009. *The International Journal of Not-for-Profit Law* Volume 12, Number 3 May 2010, p. 21. [www.icnl.org](http://www.icnl.org). Accessed on September 15, 2010.

countries. This has generated an internal debate within the Ethiopian Muslims diaspora. Some are considering the possibility of reorienting towards 'development' with a lower profile rights activities. Others, including many CSOs at home and in the diaspora, contest the new legislation and the 'withdrawal' from the rights advocacy works it entails<sup>5</sup>. The final outcome of this debate will be seen in due course of time. As it stands, however, it has changed the tone of the relationship between the government and the diaspora organizations from mutual understanding to simmering tension.

### 3. Analytical Framework: Revisiting Long-distance Nationalism

Long-distance nationalism, the dominant paradigm in transnational studies, depicts the diaspora as a particular form of subject bent on advancing radical view points on homeland socio-political conflicts (Anderson 1992; Skrbis 1999; Demmers 2002, Lyons 2006). Accordingly, the intransigency of the diaspora emanate from the unique decoupling of action from its consequences. Located far in the comfort zone of the host countries the diaspora are supposed to indulge in radicalization of conflicts in their country of origin rather than working towards a negotiated settlement of social and political conflicts. According to Benedict Anderson who coined the term 'long distance nationalist':

For while technically a citizen of the state in which he comfortably lives, but to which he may feel little attachment, he finds it tempting to play identity politics by participating (via propaganda, money, weapons, any way but voting) in the conflicts of his imagined *Heimat* - now only fax time away. But this citizenshipless participation is inevitably non-responsible - our hero will not have to answer for, or pay the price of, the long distance politics he undertakes. He is also easy prey for shrewd political manipulators in his *Heimat* (Anderson 1992:13).

Building on Anderson's notion of long distance nationalism and its non-responsible political participation, Demmers (2002) has introduced the concept of 'delocalization of conflict dynamics' within the nation state:

By long-distance interference with the conflict in their homeland, diaspora communities are engaged in a sort of virtual conflict: they live their conflicts through the internet, email, television, and telephone without direct (physical) suffering, risks, or accountability. Therefore, they are engaged in processes of conflict dynamics that differ importantly from their identity group members in their homelands. Although hardly investigated, this delocalisation of contemporary conflict and the long-distance participation of diaspora communities are likely to have a complex, and crucial, effect on the conflict (Demmers 2002: 10).

Recent studies have, however, moved away from the caricature of the diaspora as the 'bad guys' and instead emphasized the multifaceted nature of their long distance nationalism, which is 'always a part of a broader and heavily symbolic discursive field' (Skrbis 1999: 10). The nature of diasporic politics is manifold and highly case-specific.

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<sup>5</sup> For a comprehensive account of this debate, listen to a four part series at <http://radionegashi.ethiopianmuslims.net>. Social Issue - Panel Discussion with Muslim Intellectuals and Community Leaders on Abuse of Muslims Rights, May 2009.

Kaldor (1996), for instance, points at the presence of both cosmopolitan anti-nationalists and reactionary ethno-nationalists within diasporas. Others, such as Appadurai (1995) see room for hybrid, diasporic third space. Nevertheless, Anderson seems to have an enduring legacy in the field of transnational studies evident in his continued relevance as a frame of reference. Terrence Lyons (2009), for instance, has proposed a typology of diasporas and modes of involvement in homeland affairs. One type of diaspora is what he calls conflict-generated diasporas who are intimately connected to the homeland conflict situation:

Beyond resources, conflict-generated diasporas frequently have a particularly important role in framing conflict issues and defining what is politically acceptable. Diaspora groups created by conflict and sustained by traumatic memories tend to compromise less and therefore reinforce and exacerbate conflicts' protractedness' (Lyons 2009: 589).

While commenting on the conflict generated Ethiopian diaspora and their role in the post 2005 election crisis, Lyons further wrote, 'this tendency to frame the homeland conflict in categorical, hard-lined terms strengthens confrontational homeland leaders and organizations and undermines others seeking compromise' (ibid.). The so-called New Wars hypothesis, the presupposition that the nature of wars have fundamentally changed in the post cold-war period in a non-ideological and partisan direction, has also contributed to the depiction of the diaspora as a conflict actors. While diasporas, like any other set of actors, can also 'simultaneously be "peace-makers" and "peace-breakers"', much of the existing literature tends to concentrate on the negative aspects and influences exerted by diasporas on conflict situations (Pirkkalainen and Abdile 2009: 5).

The paper challenges the conventional wisdom in transnational studies and shows the progressive side of diaspora engagement on homeland affairs through a case study of the Ethiopian Muslims diaspora. Muslims have been one of Ethiopia's historic minorities with a low level of political participation and a high degree of social discrimination. Although political reforms since the 1974 revolution have to some extent redressed the issue of religious equality a lot remains to be desired before Ethiopian national identity is reconstituted on a more inclusive bases. The Ethiopian Muslim diaspora, through a rights based advocacy, are actively engaged in enhancing the wider game of democratic politics in Ethiopia. A closer examination of the moderate long distance religious nationalism of the Ethiopian Muslims diaspora and the symmetric collaboration with Muslims in the homeland also challenges the indiscriminate labeling of the diaspora as 'intransigent', 'hegemonic' and 'conflict actors'.

I hasten to add here that peace should not be understood as 'submission' to a status quo, a status quo that conceals structures of inequality. Under the circumstances in which a status quo is oppressive, the transformation of structural injustice can initially lead to tensions and conflicts; yet, the aim in the long term is more justice and more stable peace within a society. In that sense some conflicts could be more progressive than the pseudo stability which submission to a status quo creates. For, such 'stability' is very fragile and as soon as power relations among the actors change it is susceptible to violent conflicts. The Ethiopian Muslims rights-movement should thus not be judged by the momentary tensions and conflicts it generates but rather by its legitimate bases.

The occasional conflicts that attend this rights-movement is often referred to by partisan observers and members of the dominant Christian population in order to produce 'evidence' for the assumption that after all, the Muslims rights-movement in Ethiopia is instigated by some 'sinister' members of the diaspora who are themselves exposed to and influenced by the radical ideologies and interest of the global Islamic establishments. On the contrary, the discursive activities as well as the practical involvement of the Ethiopian Muslim diaspora in the Muslims' rights movement in the homeland contribute to peace building in many ways. Specifically, they are engaged in re-narrating the Ethiopian nation on inclusive bases; seeking an autonomous national organization, and dialoging with the political leadership and religious authorities in order to contribute in reforming the Ethiopian polity along democratic lines. The Ethiopian Muslim diaspora have also contributed to conflict resolution within the Muslim community, which is rife with sectarian violence.

#### 4. Major Religious Groups in Ethiopia

Ethiopia has diverse religious traditions. There are three major categories of religious groups in Ethiopia: the followers of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC), Muslims, and Protestants (evangelical Christians). Ethiopia's religious demography according to the 2007 census is presented in Table 1:

**Table 1. The religious demography of Ethiopia**

Religious group	Number of population	Percentage
Orthodox	32,138,126	43.5
Muslims	25,045,550	33.9
Protestants	13,746,787	18.6
Catholic	536,827	0.7
Traditional	1,957,944	2.6

The introduction of Christianity as the state religion of Ethiopia came about not as the result of organized evangelical activity from outside the country, but because it was the desire of the king. King Ezana of the Axumite kingdom was converted into Christianity in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, and Orthodox Christianity was the official state religion in Ethiopia until the 1974 revolution. It does, however, not constitute a purely religious phenomenon in the country, but plays an integral role in all aspects of national life. Although the EOC has severely lost its political clout and economic privileges after the 1974 revolution, it is nevertheless still the dominant religious group constituting 43 per cent of the country's population. This dominant status is, however, currently contested by both Muslims and evangelical Christians. The EOC is very apprehensive of the rapid growth of both Islam and Evangelical Christianity, which has generated a siege mentality.

Despite the strong identification of Ethiopia with (Orthodox) Christianity, Islam in Ethiopia is as old as Islam itself. History of Islam in Ethiopia dates back to 615 A.D. when the companions of the Prophet Mohamed (the Sahaba) came to Axum fleeing religious persecution by the Qurayish ruling elite in Mecca (see Trimmingham 1952; Erlich 1994, 2007). Amidst this persecution the Prophet advised the Sahabas to migrate to Axum where they would be protected by a righteous Christian king, widely known in the Arab world as Najashi. Appreciative of Najashi's favor the Prophet is believed to have made the following historic statement in the Hadith regarding Ethiopia: *utruku al-habasha ma tarakukum* ("Leave the Abyssinians/Ethiopians alone, so long as they do not take the offensive"). According to Islamic traditions this is the reason why the early jihad was not applied to Ethiopia at a time when all countries in the Red Sea sub region succumbed to the new Islamic political and military power (Trimingham 1952; Erlich 1994). According to the 2007 census, Muslims constitute around 34 per cent of Ethiopia's 76 million people, which makes them the second largest religious group in the country. Islam in Ethiopia had an auspicious beginning thanks to the hospitality the companions of the prophet Mohammed got from a benevolent Axumite (Christian) king. From early on, however, Islam in Ethiopia had to deal with a politically entrenched (Orthodox) Christianity that flourished under and helped flourish the Ethiopian state; a political intimacy that lasted over a millennium. Although Ethiopia's secular turn during the popular revolution of 1974 ushered in a new era of Islamic revivalism, it was the 1991 regime change and the modest liberal opening (expansion of education and the IT revolution) that created new fields of possibility for Islam in Ethiopia and its global articulation.

Ethiopian Muslims belong to the wider Sunni Muslims predominantly following the Sha'afi school of thought. Mystical Islam, Sufism, is also popular. The Qaddirya order is widely practiced and in some places such as in the Jimma area the Tijaniyya order is also common. In the last three decades a wide variety of Islamic reform movements have also been active in Ethiopia. The first reformist movement is the Saudi-inspired *Salaffiyya* (also called Wahabiyya) with a literal translation and observance of Islamic scriptures. The Egyptian-based *Al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn* (Muslims Brotherhood) has also had a certain impact on Islamic reform movement in Ethiopia. A diffused, politically-oriented Islamic reform movement, what Ostebo (2010) calls the Intellectualist movement of the University students, has been ideologically affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood, where the views of Hassan al-Banna, and in particular that of Yusuf al-Qaradawi were disseminated among its followers (Ostebo 2008). *Takfir wal-Hijra* is another reform movement that operates in some parts of Ethiopia. It is a radical Islamist movement which originated in Egypt in the 1960s as an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood. Believing that much of the world is heretical, members of the movement adhere to a strict Salafi interpretation of Islam, and aim ultimately to return to what they consider to be a true Islamic society—the Islamic caliphate. This interpretation thus requires that its followers purify the world of infidels. The group is known for perpetrating violence against those it considers *kufar* (heretics), including those Arabs and Muslims whom *Takfiris* do not consider to be living in accordance with true Islam (Gleis 2005). The Indian-based *Tabligh Ja'amat* movement (Society for spreading faith) is a rapidly expanding Islamic reformist movement in Ethiopia. The movement primarily aims at Islamic spiritual reformation by working at the grass roots level, reaching out to Muslims

across all social and economic spectra to bring them closer to the practices of Islamic prophet Muhammad. Tabligh Jamaat maintains a non-affiliating stature in matters of politics and *fiqh* (jurisprudence) so as to eschew the controversies that would otherwise accompany such affiliations.

Protestantism was brought to Ethiopia through mission societies in the 19th century. Three main missions fashioned the modern Protestant churches in Ethiopia: the Lutherans (*Mekane Yesus*); the Sudan Interior Mission (*Qale Hiywot*) and the Mennonite Mission (*Meserete Kiristos* and *Mulu Wengel*). Currently, a large number of foreign missionary groups operate in the country. Protestant organizations operate under the umbrella of the 22-member Evangelical Church Fellowship of Ethiopia. As of 2007, Protestants constitute almost 19 per cent of the total population, or about 13.7 million followers. They are by far the fastest growing religious group in Ethiopia, particularly in the urban areas. Presently, over 250 religious denominations, churches, or ministries are registered with the Ministry of Justice, most of which belong to the Pentecostal and Charismatic spectrum (Haustein 2008).

There are also approximately 800,000 Catholics in Ethiopia - just under one per cent of the total population. It is to be noted that Catholicism briefly managed to be the official state religion in Ethiopia in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Tadesse 1972). Unable to recover from the Orthodox resistance with a vengeance, the Catholic Church is now reduced to a religious minority among the Christian establishments. Well-resourced by the Vatican, the Church has recently activated an evangelizing mission in the peripheral areas of the country, where it has secured a growing number of followers. There is also a small, albeit well established, Seventh Day Adventist Christian community in Ethiopia numbering close to 100,000.

## **5. The socio-political marginalization of Islam in Ethiopia**

Spared of the jihad, either on design or by default, Islam was nevertheless introduced to Ethiopia early on through the international trade routes that linked Ethiopia with the Arabian world as well as through the works of indigenous Muslim scholars (Hussein 2006). By the 9th century AD, the Shewan Sultanate emerged at the periphery of the Axumite Christian kingdom in central Ethiopia and stayed in power until the 13<sup>th</sup> century (Abir 1980). The expansion of Islam coincided with the decline of the Axumite kingdom (Tadesse 1972). By the time the Christian kingdom was reconstituted in the form of the so-called Solomonic dynasty in the central highlands in the second half of the 13th century, Islam had already been well entrenched in the central and south-eastern part of the country taking advantage of the flourishing international trade that linked the Ethiopian hinterland with the Gulf of Aden (Trimingham 1952). A more organized and militant Sultanate of Ifat replaced the Sultanate of Shewa towards the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries were times of intense political and economic competition between the Solomonic Christian kingdom (Abyssinia) and the Sultanate of Ifat and other Islamic principalities. In these protracted hegemonic struggles the Christian kingdom took the upper hand except for a brief interlude in the 16th century,

when the balance of power swayed towards Islam with the emergence of the Sultanate of Adal under its capable leader Ahmed Ibn Ibrahim Al Gahazi, popularly known as Ahmed Gagn, and his successful campaigns against the Christian kingdom. In fact, for a period of fourteen years (1529–1543) most of present-day central and northern highlands came under what Genene (2008) calls ‘the aborted Ethiopian Islamic government’. Reacting to centuries old Christian political domination and assuming a greater religious profile than his predecessors, Gagn destroyed many centers of Christian civilization and embarked on forceful conversion of Christians into Islam (Abbink 1998: 114).

The involvement of the Turks and the Portuguese, respectively, on the side of the Muslims and the Christians, certainly escalated the hegemonic struggle (Hussein 2006). If the military support Ahmed Gagn got from the Turks was important in altering the power relations so was the Portuguese support central in restoring the hegemony of the Christian kingdom. In 1543 the combined forces of Abyssinia and the Portuguese defeated the forces of Ahmed Gagn and with that, Islam decidedly lost a political clout in the affairs of the country. In fact, Islam has been viewed as a ‘national security threat’ by the country’s political leadership and the dominant Christian population ever since. Muslims were, for example, banned by law from owning land and participating in national politics.

While the Christian kingdom dominated most of the central and northern highlands, Islam progressively made headways in the peripheries of the Christian kingdom, particularly in the southern part of present-day Ethiopia. Many communities are said to have adopted Islam as a resistance ideology against the expansion of the Christian kingdom (Abbas 2002; Mohammad 1994). By the 19th century once again various prosperous Islamic kingdoms or states with Islamic orientations emerged outside of the Christian kingdom. The revitalized city state of Harar in the east; the five Oromo Gibe states in the southwest and the Sultanates of Guraghe in the south are cases in point (Bahru 2002: 128). The northern Muslims (the Were Sheikh of the Yeju and Mamadoch of Wello) even managed to dominate the Christian polity, though this came at the cost of political and cultural assimilation, while another section of northern Muslims (the Were Himano of southern Wello) put up a strong resistance against the revitalized Christian kingdom.

The second half of the 19th century marked a renewed struggle for hegemony between the Christian kingdom and the Islamic states. The revival of the Christian kingdom was initiated by Emperor Tewodros (1855 -1869) and Emperor Yohannes (1872-1889), who vigorously sought to curb the rise of Islamic power in the region (Bahru 2002). Both ‘attempted to formally proscribe the practice of Islamic religion, endeavoring to enforce mass conversion to Christianity to enhance national unity’ (Abbink 1998: 115). The revival of the Christian kingdom was brought into completion by the kingdom of Shewa, an offshoot of the Solomonic dynasty in central Ethiopia. Its astute leader, king Menelik, managed to create and expand his own political space by exploiting colonial rivalries and the internal divisions among other competing political centers (Bahru 2002). With a differential access to the fire power of the colonial powers, king Menelik managed to subjugate the various polities outside the Christian kingdom, including the newly

established Islamic states. By the end of the 19th century the kingdom of Shewa was transformed into an Ethiopian empire with larger Islamic subjects than was the case during the medieval period. This historical trajectory has given the impression for the Christian rulers and some western observers alike, that there is unbroken continuity of Christian rule over the whole of present-day Ethiopia. As Markakis (2003: 2) noted, 'the official myth presented Ethiopia as a purely Christian state'. In a speech before the United States Congress, Haile Selassie described his country as an island of Christianity in a sea of Islam. This myth was widely accepted abroad, and was propagated by the first generation of foreign scholars who studied this country. If this image had largely defined Ethiopia's foreign relations with its Muslim neighbors, it has also justified the sociopolitical marginality of its Muslim population. This has certainly a bearing on the Ethiopian Muslims' sense of alienation from Ethiopian national identity, whose parameters were largely defined by a Christian heritage.

## 6. Religious Reforms in Ethiopia

The socio-political reforms brought by the 1974 revolution and the end of the Christian monarchy partly redressed the marginalization of Muslims in Ethiopia (Hussein 1994). Church and state parted company and Ethiopia has been a secular state ever since. For the first time in the history of the country, religious freedom was proclaimed and Islam gained parity with Christianity in political dispensation (Abbink 1998; Hussein 2006, Ostebo 2008). According to Hussein (2006: 10), 'although the resurgence of Islam in Ethiopia in the 1970s was part of the worldwide revival of Islam, one of the most decisive internal factors that contributed to the former was the outbreak of the popular revolution that toppled the Ethiopian monarchy in 1974 and created favorable conditions for disadvantaged and oppressed communities such as Ethiopian Muslims to demand a radical change in the state's policy towards them'. At the height of the revolutionary fervor, Muslims waged a mammoth demonstration on 20th April 1974 to bring to the attention of the incoming Derg regime the human right issues of the Muslim community. The demonstrators called for the separation of religion from politics, publicly denounced the notion that Ethiopia was an island of Christianity surrounded and besieged by Islam, and declared that it was the home of the adherents of other faiths, including Islam. As an act of an important historical concession the Derg declared religious equality and the three main Islamic festivals were observed as public holidays for the first time in the history of the country (Ostebo 2008). Subsequently, the Ethiopian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs was established in 1976, but 'throughout the period of military rule it only functioned as a *de facto*, not *de jure*, organization' (Hussein 2006: 12). The religious reform of the Derg did not go to the extent of redefining the parameters of Ethiopia's national identity. True to its socialist orientation, the Derg by and large considered religion as 'the opium of the masses'. It was also fervently nationalist which entailed, among other things, recycling old national (Christian) symbols. Ethiopian historiography was left untouched with its 'unbroken' three-thousand-years-history paradigm (cf. the Solomonic narrative); a historiography still populated by Christian heroes whereas the Islamic heritage of the country was largely silenced. The Derg, however, had inadvertently positive effects on Ethiopian Muslims. By equalizing all religions, the EOC,

Protestants, and Muslims all got off from the same starting block at the same time in the post-Derg period, though slowed down by historical baggage

The regime change in 1991 brought yet another opportunity to redress the issue of religious inequality in Ethiopia. The EPRDF came to power as a champion of minority rights, though its attitude towards the Muslims has changed over time. As part of its project of deconstructing 'imperial' Ethiopia, the EPRDF made connections with various marginalized groups, including Muslims. The 1995 Constitution generously provides for religious rights. Article 11 ensures separation of state and religion; Article 27 ascertains freedom of religion, belief and opinion; Article 29 ascertains the right of thought, opinion and expression and grants freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art or through any media of his choice. Article 31 grants freedom of association; Article 32 allows freedom of movement within and outside the country. These have been translated into the emergence of a confident and assertive Ethiopian Muslim community. Taking advantage of the freedom of movement, Ethiopian Muslims are now better connected with the Islamic World through Hajj and Umra as well as other forms of travel to Muslim countries (Carmichael 1996)<sup>6</sup>. Freedom of association has meant that Islam in Ethiopia, for the first time, has got a legal organizational expression through any media of its choice. Related to that, the abolition of censorship has meant the flourishing of Islamic literature with a massive translation of works of major global Muslim scholars. Religious equality is expressed in the construction of many mosques, though this has in some areas provoked strong Christian reaction. Religious freedom brought confidence in practicing the Islamic dress code and following Islamic life style, and liberalization of the press has also meant the emergence of Islamic publishing houses (Hussein 1998; 2006). Responding to the Muslims' rights movement that centers on inclusive citizenship, EPRDF has also made some historical concessions to Muslims in the form of a greater recognition of the Islamic heritage of the country<sup>7</sup>. As Hussein (2006:13) noted, 'it is a tribute to the open-mindedness of the present government [EPRDF] ... has in the end fulfilled one of the cherished aspirations of Ethiopian Muslims by providing sizeable plots of land and granting permission for the construction of mosques in many parts of the capital. Minarets and glittering domes of newly constructed mosques have further enhanced the visibility and prominence of Islam in the public sphere'.

Another new opportunity structure is Muslims' enhanced access to education. Muslims access to education was very limited during the imperial period. This was for two reasons. On the one hand, education was initially very much associated with the Orthodox Church or run by western missionaries. Many Muslim families felt uncomfortable sending their children to school for fear of Christian influence or the negative impact of 'modernity' imparted through schools on adherence to Islamic values

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<sup>6</sup> Previously there was a Haj quota imposed on Ethiopian Muslims by the socialist government with an average of 2,000 people per year.

<sup>7</sup> The Ministry of Culture, for instance, has proposed the Najashi Mosque to the UNESCO as a world cultural heritage. The Ministry has also designed a project to turn Negash village into an Islamic centre of learning with an Islamic University.

and practices. Those who showed interest in modern education had to pass as Christians by changing or modifying their names to hide their Islamic identity. Although Muslim areas still lag behind Christian majority areas in terms of access to social services, Muslims' access to education in the last three decades has significantly improved. Muslims, for instance, constitute around 14 per cent of the total student population (Ahmedin 2010). Better access to education is currently translated into the capacity to make use of new information technology - audio-visual media and digital devices - to network with the Ethiopian Muslims diaspora as well as the wider Islamic world.

## **7. Enduring constraints to Muslims' rights in Ethiopia**

In the previous section we have discussed the new field of possibilities for Islam in Ethiopia. In the following we turn to the existing challenges for the attainment of Muslim rights despite the changes in political structure, social changes and the emergence of a confident Islamic community. The continuities include securitization of Islam by the dominant Christian population and the Ethiopian government; the caveats put on organizational and public expression of the Islamic faith, and sectarian divisions.

### *Securitization of Islam*

Having enjoyed the status of a state religion from the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD up until the 1974 revolution and still constituting a demographic majority with a stronger political clout, the EOC has viewed Islamic revivalism in Ethiopia with consternation. It particularly feels threatened by the new historical and physical space Muslims have gained in post-1991 Ethiopia, invoking what Erlich (1994) calls the 'Gragh syndrome' i.e., the presupposition that Islamic revivalism and its political power in medieval Ethiopia that shook the Christian kingdom to its foundation was a result of the intervention of Muslim countries (Ottoman Turks) in support of the Ethiopian Muslims. The strategic co-option of Muslims by the Italians during their occupation of Ethiopia (1936-40) and the Muslims' willing cooperation with the Italians to renegotiate their historic marginality are also often referred to in order to produce 'evidence' that Ethiopian Muslims are not 'reliable citizens' (Hussein 2006). One form of Christian resistance is discursive: labeling all aspects of Islamic revival in Ethiopia as if they were a manifestation of so-called global Islamic fundamentalism, whose 'command center' is supposed to be Saudi Arabia.

It is yet unclear how much resources from global Islamic establishments have been flowing into Ethiopia. However, to reduce the complex process of Islamic revivalism into a Saudi 'master plan' would be denying the agency of the Ethiopian Muslims to be able to mobilize as a community. Although Saudi finance did reach Ethiopia, some of which was invested in the construction of Mosques especially in the early 1990s, many more Mosques were built by contributions made by rich Ethiopian Muslims, particularly the business community. Many Christians believe that Muslims will always ask for more Mosques and even if there are enough, they would still pray on the streets because they need attention and recognition. Similarly, Ethiopian governments across political regimes have all linked Islamic revivalism in Ethiopia with external players, Muslims

being a perennial source of national security threats. The securitization of Islam in Ethiopia was at its height during the imperial period, whose foreign policy making was heavily informed by religious considerations. The ideology of Ethiopia as an Island of Christianity produced a siege mentality: a country surrounded by belligerent Muslim Arab countries who are bent on destabilizing the Ethiopian polity and for which Ethiopian Muslims serve as ‘fifth columnists’. The siege mentality continued during the Derg period, though its secularist turn reduced the degree of securitization. There are indications that the Derg tended to view Islam and Ethiopian Muslims as a ‘national security threat’ especially in times of conflict with neighboring countries, which are predominantly Muslim. As Braukämper (2002: 4) noted, the ‘so-called Gagn syndrome was recalled at occasions when Christian Ethiopia felt threatened by the Muslims of the Horn of Africa...It was used, for instance, during the Ethiopian –Somali war of 1978 to unify and mobilize the Christian highlanders against the invasion of enemies from the east’.

EPRDF’s securitization of Islam in Ethiopia started in the mid-1990s. The growth of the Islamic Jihad in Eritrea; the military confrontations between Al-Ithad - a Somalia based Islamic group which actively operated in the Ogaden region - and the Ethiopian government, and the hostility between EPRDF and the National Islamic Front of Sudan in the mid-1990s seems to have brought about a change in EPRDF’s attitude towards Muslims (de Waal 2004). The perfect *cassus belli* was found in the Sudanese backed failed attempt to assassinate the Egyptian president, Hosni Mubarek, in Addis Ababa in 1995 by Islamic radicals linked to the Muslim Brotherhood. Subsequently, the government cracked down on Islamic associations and NGOs with links with the wider Islamic world. EPRDF-Muslims relation is also shaped by consideration of the alignment of forces in the geo-political power game in the Horn of Africa and beyond. The main geo-political factor that has shaped EPRDF’s policy towards Islam in Ethiopia is the ‘global war on terrorism’. Although the discourse on Islamic terrorism in Ethiopia already started in the mid-1990s, it is largely a post 9/11 phenomenon. Enthusiastically joining Bush’s ‘coalition of the willing’, the Ethiopian government has sought to reposition itself and regain its strategic importance to the US led post-cold war global order<sup>8</sup>. On their part, western powers have signified the strategic importance of Ethiopia in what appears to be a new search for the Prester John of the Crusades<sup>9</sup>. Adapting and reacting to this global discourse, the Ethiopian government has managed to extract tremendous resources and much needed political legitimacy from the west despite its poor record on human rights and political repression<sup>10</sup>. Ethiopia’s invasion of Somalia in 2007 on the basis of ‘immanent and real danger’ from the Somali Islamists, the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC), is situated within this larger geo-political context. As Ostebo (2008:435)

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<sup>8</sup> In post 9/11 the US has established counterterrorism programs in east Africa. The Djibouti based Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa (CJTF-HoA) is part of US Africa command. It consists of 1,100 US military and civilian personnel. Ethiopia is one of the key actors in this new US security architecture in the region (Rabasa 2009).

<sup>9</sup> Prester John is the name given to a mythical medieval Christian priest-king of a vast empire in Central Asia, and later in Ethiopia. Medieval Europe hoped that Prester John might become an ally of the European princes fighting to stop the Muslim advance in Mediterranean areas during the crusades. In fact, the Portuguese support of the Christian kingdom against the army of Ahmed Gagn was a reflection of the Europeans search for the Prester John.

<sup>10</sup> Human Right Watch reports on Ethiopia (2007; 2008).

has convincingly shown in his in-depth analysis of the dynamics of religious identification in contemporary Ethiopia, although Islam does not have a political agenda in Ethiopia, the perception that it has informs government policy making: 'An increased number of mosques and higher representation of Muslims in public life can hardly qualify as evidence for a politicization of Islam in Ethiopia. It has not been uncommon, however, to equate Muslim demands of better representation with a politicization of Islam'. Similarly, Hussein (1998: 106) noted that 'in the Ethiopian situation, fundamentalism is a misleading concept which distorts, and thus hardly applies to, the process of changes in the self-perception of, and assertion of rights by, Ethiopian Muslims. Revivalism is a more proper term to describe the process of transformation of the status and image of Islam in Ethiopia'.

#### *The caveat put on organizational expression of Islam in Ethiopia*

The 1995 Constitution has generously provided for religious freedom. Taking advantage of the constitutionally enshrined religious and associational freedom, the Ethiopian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (Mejlis) was reorganized. It has attained legal recognition, and a new leadership was elected. Besides, other types of Islamic associations have proliferated. These associations were not only active locally, but had links with transnational Islamic networks and communicated with the wider Islamic world. The mid 1990s brought, however, government repression of Islamic organizations and a tighter control of the Mejlis. Following the 1995 'Mubarak incident', many Islamic associations and NGOs were closed down. Within the Mejlis itself power struggle led to a violent conflict between the police and the worshippers within the Anwar Mosque in Addis Ababa on February 21, 1995 in which nine people were killed and 129 people wounded. The EPRDF has tightly controlled the Mejlis leadership ever since, with the pretext of avoiding similar incidents in the future. Over a period of a decade the Mejlis was represented by a leadership which suffered from a high popular legitimacy deficit. The issue of organizational control was compounded by a personality factor. The chairman, Sheikh Elias Redwan, who led the Mejlis over a decade (1995-2009), is widely believed to be inept professionally, lacking religious wisdom, and indifferent to the Islamic conduct of life. In February 2009 the Mejlis elected new leaders: Sheikh Ahmedin of Oromia Majlis (President), Shaykh Muhammad Ibrahim of Harari Majlis (Vice Chairman), and Al-Mohammed Siraj of Amhara Majlis (General Secretary). Many Muslims are skeptical about the new leadership, who they think was 'selected' by the EPRDF instead of assuming power through a competitive election. The Grand Mufti Sheikh Omer Idris of Addis Ababa Mejlis was widely expected to be in the new leadership. The issue of a legitimate and functional Islamic community organization is one of the most contentious issues between the EPRDF and the Muslims. The lack of a representative election process has not only denied the Muslims a legitimate organization but also makes the EPRDF's drive to control 'Islamic fundamentalism' unattainable 'because the Islamic leadership in Ethiopia is diffuse and unaccountable, making Ethiopian Muslims further vulnerable to imported visions of Islam from various external sources'<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with Abdurhaman Ali, former student activist, December 12, 2008.

### *Limits to public expression of Islamic faith in Ethiopia*

Although Islam's visibility in Ethiopia's public sphere has significantly increased in the post-1991 period, Muslims are still claiming a greater physical space for the construction of Mosques commensurate with their demographic size. As Hussein (2006: 12) noted, 'the construction of almost all the major mosques in Addis Ababa (and those elsewhere in the country) was invariably preceded by opposition from the Christian residents and churches of the areas in which the mosques were intended to be built, and by a protracted legal battle with the government departments responsible for granting the plots of land, issuing the necessary title deeds and the permission for construction'. In fact, many of the recent religious conflicts in various parts of the country are one way or the other related to the competition or conflicting claims over physical space among the various religious groups. Ahmedin Jebel (2010: 5/8), one of the foremost Ethiopian Muslim scholars on comparative religion, describes the imbalance in physical space among the religious groups as follows:

Many of our mosques are pint-sized. These mosques are constructed with much hardship though some [Christians] are accusing that the number of mosques has increased. If we consider the number of churches, Protestants have 12,000 churches and 30,805 preaching sites. The Orthodox Church has 500,000 priests, 40,000 churches and 2,000,000 religious students.

A more contentious issue regarding the competition for physical space among religious groups is the EOC's monopolistic closure in Axum and other northern towns. The claim for a larger physical space ranges from an increase on the number of mosques in the nation's capital and the Christian majority areas to a right to build the first mosque ever in Axum, a region which the EOC claims as its sacred space<sup>12</sup>. The EOC's justification that 'Muslims could build mosque in Axum only when Christians are allowed to build churches in Mecca' is contested by the Muslims in the sense that the multi-ethnic and multi-religious Ethiopia is not Saudi Arabia. Religious pluralism in Axum is also defended in reference to the fact that Axum is also a sacred place for Islam in general and Ethiopian Muslims in particular, 'the city of Najashi' (The Document, p.4).

### *Lack of Consensus on Secularism*

The latest move by the government that limits the public manifestation of Islamic faith is the 2008 controversial directive by the Ministry of Education, which bans the right to manifest religious symbols in institutions of higher learning. This includes the ban on headscarf (*hijab*) and communal prayer (*salat*) in the universities and colleges. The Ethiopian Constitution has committed itself to religious freedom and equality in various provisions. It takes the enlightened liberal stand that every person has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This freedom encompasses both the inner personal belief as well as its external manifestations. That the right includes the freedom to hold or adopt a religion of one's choice and to worship, observe, exercise,

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<sup>12</sup> So far neither a Mosque nor a Protestant Church is allowed to be built within 18 kms radius in all directions of the town. Attempts by local Muslims to build mosques were violently blocked by the EOC with the complacency, if not consent, of the leadership of the Tigray regional state.

teach and proclaim, either individually or in fellowship with others, in public or private, makes the right complete. The practice is, however, different from what is stated in the constitution.

The directive has provoked a widespread opposition by students who waged demonstrations and wrote petitions to the highest political leadership of the country. While contesting the directive, the Ethiopian Muslim students have clashed with the authorities in the universities in Addis Ababa as well as in the new regional universities and colleges. The attempt by the Addis Ababa University students to express solidarity with the women Muslim students, who clashed with the authorities of the University of Teppi and University of Wello in April 22, 2009, led to a swift repression by the police who intercepted their march to the Prime Minister's Office and arrested many students for inciting 'religious violence',<sup>13</sup>.



*Addis Ababa University Muslim students' demonstration against the directive of the Ministry of Education to regulate religious dress codes and prayers in educational institutions, April 2009*

(Source: <http://blog.ethiopianmuslims.net/negashi/wp-content/uploads/2007/11/dscf0826.JPG>).

The government responded to students' demands by saying that the new policy applies for all, not only for the Muslim students. From the perspective of the Muslim students, however, the ban has confronted them with an unwarranted choice between their religious identity and education. Forced to choose, they opt for the former but this *de facto* exclusion from education is critiqued as yet another mechanism for marginalizing Muslims from the means of individual and collective advancement.

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<sup>13</sup> [http://blog.ethiopianmuslims.net/negashi/Muslims Students Struggle against Discrimination](http://blog.ethiopianmuslims.net/negashi/Muslims%20Students%20Struggle%20against%20Discrimination), April 24, 2009. Accessed on May 2, 2009.

### *Sectarian divisions*

The post 1991 liberal opening is Janus-faced. If it has created an enabling condition for the emergence of a vibrant and confident Muslim community in a country where Islam existed at the shadow of Christianity, it has also meant diversity and fragmentation of the Muslim community. As it was already noted, various competing Muslim groups exist in contemporary Ethiopia, ranging from Sufi brotherhoods to a wide variety of Islamic reform movements. A more pronounced rift is between the Salafis and the Sufis. Sufis' saint-veneration is severely criticized by the Sufis' detractors as *bida* (unwelcome innovation) that threatens *tawhid*, Islam's radical monotheistic stance. Both the Sufis and the Salafis have produced narratives of entitlement over authentic knowledge and stewardship for Islam.

The traditional Sufi scholars derided the literalist *ulama* as 'imitators of the Saudi Wahhabis; Muslims with superficial knowledge accredited by the so-called modern institutions of Islamic learning'. The literalists, on the other hand, employed rhetorical coercion methods, particularly the validity of their position in reference to their greater competence in scriptural knowledge *vis a vis* the local Sufi traditions. Priding on the educational certificates they brought from the Arab world, these returnee *ulama* looked down upon the traditional *ulama* who are educated at the *zawiyya* (local Islamic centers of education). In the perspective of the new literalist *ulama* it appeared as if 'true' Islam just arrived in Ethiopia in 1991. The traditional *ulama* countered the literalists' claim on historical ground; indicating that they have maintained Islam and nourished it for the last 1,400 years against multiple odds and political persecution by the dominant Christian establishment. This seemingly theological debate has thus a political undertone.

There also seems to be competition over financial resources coming from global Islamic networks and the Middle Eastern countries that support the Salafi. This theological debate, fuelled by ethnic cleavages, had created a potential for large scale sectarian violence among the Ethiopian Muslims, as is the case elsewhere in the world. Government interest in and manipulation of the internal theological debate has also further politicised the sectarian divide. By and large, the EPRDF tends to favor what it calls *hager beqel islimina* (home-grown Islam) or *nebaru islimina* (indigenous Islam), euphemisms to refer to the 'tolerant' and 'apolitical' Sufi over the 'militant' Wahhabi/Salafi with a 'political agenda'<sup>14</sup>. Under government protection and financial support, Sufi shrines have seen revival and vibrancy in recent years. The August 2010

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<sup>14</sup> In the annual meeting with the Youth, Addis Ababa, February 200, the Prime Minister referred to this distinction and the need to protect the *hager beqel islimina* from its persecution by foreign-funded Islam. Furthermore, as an act of solidarity heads of regional states have visited the shrines of venerated saints. This was certainly the case when former head of Oromia regional state, Junedin Sado, paid a visit to the Sheikh Hussein shrine in Bale. On a similar note, the Ethiopian television broadcasted the special program on the *mawlid* from Jema Nigus, another famous site for a venerated Muslim saint in Wello. ETV, March 20, 2008.

annual pilgrimage to the Sheikh Abrehet shrine in the Gurage Zone is a case in point. More than half a million people from various regions of the country participated in this pilgrimage, an event which was broadcast by ETV. The US, reflecting its wider global strategy of combating 'Islamists' is also involved in this theological debate siding with the Sufis. The US embassy in Addis has shown interest in financing Islamic shrines in Ethiopia. In December 2008, for instance, top embassy personnel traveled to the Bale Zone of Oromiya to launch a cultural preservation project at the Sheikh Nur Hussein Shrine, a religious pilgrimage site established in the 13th century. The Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation provided a grant in the amount of USD 25,600 (US Embassy News, 2008). EPRDF's notion of *hager beqel islimina* and US's partisanship with Sufi Islam resonates with the notion of Islam *noir* (Black Islam) of west Africa, 'a classification exploited by the French colonial authorities in an effort to keep West Africans isolated from other variants of Islam which were seen as a greater menace' (Janson 2005: 450).

## **8. The peace building activities of the Ethiopian Muslims diaspora**

The Ethiopian Muslims diaspora organizations, particularly the Network (European) and Badr (USA) are on the forefront of the Ethiopian Muslims' rights movement. One of Badr's top visions and priorities is, in fact, to improve the social and economic status of Ethiopian Muslims in Ethiopia, so that they can fully participate in the affairs of their country. Badr advocates for legislative and public policies for the protection of civil and humanitarian rights for Ethiopian Muslims by advancing the freedom of worship according to one's belief and the right of the people to assemble peaceably, and by petitioning the government for a redress of grievances.<sup>15</sup> Badr also pursues open dialogues with the government and faith-based organizations with regards to protection of legal and constitutional rights, as well as pursuing intercultural and interfaith dialogues which can greatly contribute to mutual understanding, cooperation, and peaceful coexistence among the diverse peoples of Ethiopia. Badr, though based in the US, has also served as an umbrella organization for Ethiopian Muslims outside of North America. In fact, the Ethiopian Muslims in Europe have actively participated in Badr's activities including its annual conventions.

The Network was established in 2004 in response to the growth of Ethiopian Muslim communities in Europe and their organizational needs. The Network is registered in Stockholm, Sweden, as a nongovernmental, nonprofit organization with a mission 'to create an effective and sustainable Network that enables Ethiopian Muslims come together and coordinates their activities with the view to contribute their share to the betterment of their society and their country'. According to the Network's mission statement, 'it works with other organized communities, institutions and individuals for a peaceful, democratic and prosperous Ethiopia as long as they respect the rights,

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<sup>15</sup> Badr's vision, <http://badrethiopia.org/newsite>.

culture, belief and general identity of Ethiopian Muslims as Muslims and Ethiopians'. The Network's position on interfaith relations is further presented as follows: 'a belief in respectful and honest dialogue and discussion is a key to understanding peaceful co-existence and cooperation'. Badr and the Network have sought to reach out to the Ethiopian Muslim population and the country's political leadership through various mechanisms. They have established a very strong cyber presence (<http://www.badrethiopia.org/www.ethiopianmuslims.net>); issued statements on current affairs; held demonstrations; organized joint homeland-diaspora meetings; communicated with fellow Muslims in the homeland through long distance telephone calls; conducted Pal-talks and Tele-conferences, run online radio stations (<http://radionegashi.ethiopianmuslims.net>; <http://www.radio-bilal.com/radio/>), and sent delegations to Ethiopia. In November 2010 Badr also launched a TV program through the Ethiopian Broadcasting Service (EBS) satellite TV.

The Network has undertaken various activities by its own and in joint actions with other organizations. It has conducted various online discussion events and hosted international conferences that articulated the challenges Muslims face in contemporary Ethiopia. Facilitated by the Network, Ethiopian Muslim organizations, leaders, activists, associations, thinkers and scholars all over the world held, for instance, a teleconference on the controversial results of the 2007 census and its implications. The conference was transmitted live on pal-talk to large audiences, who had a chance to participate in the conference. The Network also wrote petitions against the violation of Muslims' constitutional rights, such as the 2008 Ministry of Education's ban on religious practices in educational institutions. Apart from rights advocacy, the Network has also funded the education of more than 120 *yetim* (orphans) and *miskin* (children from poor families and who are unable to bear the costs by themselves). It is also planning to diversify its involvement in projects dedicated to the prevention of HIV and support its victims at home. In order to achieve these objectives, the Network uses various media outlets. It runs a very vibrant website ([www.ethiopianmuslims.net](http://www.ethiopianmuslims.net)), a blog (Najashi blog) and a satellite radio (radio Najashi). In the following sections I discuss at length three of the diaspora activities and their significance to and impact on homeland peace building.

One novel approach by the Ethiopian Muslims diaspora is its strong faith in dialogue, evident in the many delegations it has sent to the country. The April 2007 delegation is particularly noteworthy. This delegation consisted of nine members out of which four came from the US, three from Europe, one from Canada and one from Saudi Arabia. The composition reflects the efforts the organizers made to represent the Ethiopian Muslims worldwide. Besides, all the nine members of the delegation have a high social standing, they are ethnically representative and theologically plural. Before the delegation headed for Ethiopia, it undertook a thorough investigation and conducted a baseline survey in order to establish the prominent Muslim issues in contemporary Ethiopia. Among the nine member delegation three were the Network's senior officials from Germany, Belgium and Sweden. On the basis of its findings as well as the extensive feedback it got from the homeland Muslims, the delegation produced a seventeen page document entitled *Questions Raised by the Ethiopian Muslims diaspora to the Prime Minister Meles Zenawi* (April 2007), which outlined and articulated the prominent Ethiopian Muslims' issues (here after referred to as the Document).

The reference to this document by the various Ethiopian Muslim organizations, the Ethiopian government and in the counter-discourse of the Christian establishment makes it appear as the ‘manifesto’ of the emerging Ethiopian Muslims’ rights movement. The main motif of this document and the identity politics of the Ethiopian Muslims in general gears towards renegotiating the historic marginality of Muslims in the hitherto Christian dominated Ethiopian polity. Drawing on their new sets of democratic experiences in their host countries and referring to the globally recognized legitimizing discourses, the Ethiopian Muslims diaspora eschew the language of violence and frame their claims in the ‘rights language’. During its one month stay in Ethiopia the delegation held discussion with high ranking government officials including the Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, and with a cross-section of the Muslim community and the Christian leadership. The document contains a wide range of issues, but the main talking points were summarized under eight headings:

- Secure the autonomy of the Mejlis – this entails restructuring that creates a democratic environment for the election of able and representative leaders. The need for restructuring of the Mejlis is justified on the basis of the high level of legitimacy deficits of its leadership
- Implement the constitutionally enshrined citizenship rights and religious equality – this is a reference to infringements of the freedom of association; the need to reform the Sharia courts; the right to acquire land for the construction of mosques, and the right of worship in public spaces particularly in educational institutions
- Highlight the Islamic heritage of the country, particularly Ethiopia’s special role in the history of Islam (the shelter the country gave to the persecuted followers of the prophet) – the need to redefine the parameters of Ethiopian national identity on an inclusive basis and the economic and political benefits Ethiopia could get by forging closer links with the Islamic world than the ‘siege mentality’ of the country’s previous leadership. Towards that end the delegation proposed that the government should strive to incorporate Ethiopia into the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC)<sup>16</sup>
- Allow the unencumbered operation of Islamic NGOs in the country – in reference to the institutional imbalance reflected in the existence of numerous Christian NGOs as opposed to the fewer and controlled Islamic NGOs
- Allow the establishment of Islamic banks
- Maintain the secularism enshrined in the Constitution – in reference to the partisanship of the leadership of the Tigray Regional State (the Orthodox Church’s exclusivist claim over the town of Axum) and the Benishangul-

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<sup>16</sup> The OIC is an association of 56 Islamic states promoting Muslim solidarity in economic, social and political affairs ([www.oic/oci.org](http://www.oic/oci.org)).

Gumuz Regional State and its leadership's favoritism towards the Protestant Church

- Ensure the impartiality of the 2007 census – in reference to the previous censuses which are believed to have grossly and intentionally down-sized the Muslim population
- Introduce a more balanced and responsible mass media – in reference to the misrepresentation of the Muslims as if they were a national security threat
- Establish a Ministry of Religious Affairs – in reference to the need for a forum for inter-faith dialogue to avoid, mitigate and resolve religious conflicts.

Articulating the aspirations and interests of the Ethiopian Muslims by the delegation, which entails a social reform agenda, is significant as the rights movement in the homeland is not coherent and in some places it had violent expressions.

The diaspora's rights-based advocacy sharply contrasts some fringe elements within the Muslim community, which espouse violence against the Christian population and the Ethiopian government to enhance Islam's standing in the country with an ultimate objective of establishing an Islamic state. This approach, which defies Ethiopia's multi-cultural and multi-religious traditions, is certainly upheld by the Takfir al Hijra. In 2003 Hassan Taju (2005), one of the prominent Ethiopian Muslim scholars, wrote a book on the Takfir exposing their extremist ideology and denouncing their divisive strategy. Nevertheless, Takfir still operates in some pockets particularly in the Benishangul region, Jimma and eastern Oromia. As Ostebo (2010) noted, 'they played a central role in the Christian-Muslim conflicts in 2006 in the Jimma area, and have, in accordance with their name [...] assumed a radical position toward the Ethiopian state, seen among others by their refusal to hold id-cards and to pay tax. While this had been their attitude for some years, the issue was put to the forefront in 2009 when Takfiri followers around Jimma publicly announced this'. Given Ethiopia's proximity to the politically and religiously volatile Middle East, and the rise of Islamists into power in the failed state of Somalia and in the Sudan, a moderate and articulate religious voice is what Ethiopia currently needs the most.

The Network and other Muslim diaspora organizations are very critical of the way the government handles inter-faith conflict for political purposes. Aware of the alternative language of violence espoused by some fringe elements on both the Christian and Muslim sides, the Network has framed the issue in the language of human rights. In its view,

the Ethiopian government has to be decisive and shoulders the responsibility to protect the rights of all its citizens irrespective of their religion, ethnicity or economic status. The Ethiopian people are also expected to live and operate by the rule of law and in compliance with the constitution of the country. We urge the government of Ethiopia to engage in due diligence in prosecuting those individuals or groups that are bent on inciting violence and fomenting hatred between religious followers. Law and order is respected and justice is implemented in the land through mutual

understanding and peaceful co-existence among the various religious and ethnic communities that make up the unique Ethiopian mosaic.<sup>17</sup>

### *Re-constructing the nation on inclusive basis*

Many of the Ethiopian Muslims diaspora organizations have focused in their writing on deconstructing the image of Ethiopia as a Christian Island. They have reasoned, rightly, that such representation is not only historically unfounded but also seriously undermines the process of state reconstruction and democratization of the Ethiopian polity. Their discursive practice -deconstructing the official Ethiopian history in order to make national reconstruction on an inclusive basis attainable – is focused on the Najashi narrative, prestigiously referred to as the ‘First Hijra’; Axum rivaling Medina’s unique status as the land of the First Hijra. The coming of the Sahaba and the hospitality they received has been well established. What is contested is whether the Axumite king embraced Islam or not. Various Arabic sources have documented Najashi’s conversion to Islam, whereas early scholars of Ethiopian studies have ruled out the possibility of the king’s conversion on the basis of lack of evidence as well as degree of plausibility and logical possibility (Tadesse 1972; Trimmingham 1952). The argument against Najashi’s conversion is the absence of a major social upheaval of the scale the country had witnessed during king Susneyos’s reckless adoption of Catholicism as the state religion in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Regarding that, Muslim scholars refer to Arabic sources that mention the existence of clerical opposition to Najashi’s conversion (Husseini 1994). The issue of conversion is endorsed by the delegation and the Document is imbued with the special place Ethiopia occupies in the history of Islam.

The first chapter of Islamic history was closely connected to Aksum. The special relationship between early Islam and Ethiopia is of two kinds. The first is related to the stronger socio-economic ties between Axum and the Arab world before and during the rise of Islam. This tie had a political expression in the form of Axum’s occupation and administration of Yemen in the 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D. It was also expressed in the form of the existence of many slaves of Ethiopian origin in the Arab world. ‘Umm Ayman and Bilal bin Rabah, two very important companions of the Prophet, are cases in point. ‘Umm Ayman was the Prophet’s nurse who looked after him from his birth, throughout his boyhood and until his marriage. Bilal bin Rabah (the slave of a prominent Meccan) was the third Muslim after the Prophet’s wife and Abu Bakr. In fact, Bilal became the first *mu’adhdhin*, the caller for prayer in Islam. The second event that accrues a prestigious connection between Islam and Axum (Ethiopia) is related to the coming of Sahaba discussed earlier. Among the Sahaba who came to Axum were included persons very close to the Prophet such as Uthman bin ‘Affan (his son in law and the 3rd caliph); Ruqayya (his daughter), Umm Ayman (his nurse) and Ja’far (his cousin and the brother of the future Caliph Ali). The central act of connection between early Islam and Ethiopia is of course Najashi’s benevolence towards Islam and the belief in his ultimate

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<sup>17</sup> Statement by the First Hijra Foundation on religious conflict in Ethiopia, March 2009, <http://www.firsthijrah.com/>, accessed on April 12, 2009.

conversion. Najashi's benevolence may have been reciprocated by the Prophet not only in the form of *utruku al-habasha ma tarakukum* but also in his issuing Islam's first especial funeral prayer in absentia (*salat al-ghaib*) to king Najashi. 'Ethiopian Muslim tradition has canonized the Aksumite king as a Muslim saint under the honorific name, Ahmad al-Najashi, with the Prophet believed to have given him that name and also offered a special prayer' (Hussien 1996:54). Myth or reality, the issue of king Najashi's conversion to Islam is a very strong tradition among Ethiopian Muslims (The Document, p. 4).

It is no wonder, then, that the Najashi narrative provides a fertile ground for the construction of an alternative 'Great Tradition' for Ethiopian Muslims. So far the Najashi narrative has been interpreted only from a Middle Eastern perspective. Hagai Erlich, one of the authorities on history of Islam in Ethiopia, has pointed out to 'Islam's dual conceptualization of Ethiopia' through which the Arab world has viewed Ethiopia: *utruku al-habasha* (the 'Leave the habesha' tradition) and the 'Islam al-Najashi' tradition'. The 'Islam al-Najashi tradition frames the concept of Ethiopia as the historical enemy to Islam:

The king of Ethiopia, being just individual, did see the light of Islam and convert [but] Ethiopia did not follow the Najashi in conversion but rather forced him to conceal his devotion to Islam. The Ethiopian people led by the priests derided Ashama for his harboring of the sahaba. After his death, his son destroyed the Prophet's letter to him. By opposing a Muslim Najashi, Christian Ethiopia betrayed Islam. It follows that only the return of a Najashi [Ethiopian rulers] to Islam can redeem the country (Erlich 1994: 17-18).

Further elaborating on the conceptual dichotomy, the same scholar describes through that second prism, "how Ethiopia was a land of the ultimate heresy, *Irtad*; namely being a Muslim and then betraying Islam. In the eyes of Islamic radicals, Ethiopia could therefore be redeemed only by the full restoration as part of the land of Islam. Yet for Ethiopian Muslims the Najashi narrative serves the purpose of repositioning the Ethiopian Muslims vis-a-vis national identity. Accordingly, Ethiopia is not only a special country for the Christians (cf. the Island of Christianity narrative), it is also vital for the Muslims of the world in general and the Ethiopian Muslims in particular. Construed this way, goes the Najashi narrative, Islam owes Ethiopia a lot for its very survival. The hospitality and the tolerance the Sahaba got in Ethiopia is said to be critical in the survival and expansion of Islam. In this narrative, therefore, the idea of Ethiopia is positively charged from the 'least suspected corner', ironically by one of its historic minorities. If that is the case, Ethiopian Muslims would have less trouble in identifying with 'Ethiopia the land of the First Hijra' than the 'Ethiopia is an island of Christianity' variety. The double facility of the Najashi narrative to the reconstruction of religious and national identities is succinctly depicted in the document as follows:

Although we do not have a conclusive evidence to claim that Ethiopia is the first country to grant asylum to the persecuted we understand that Najashi could have well set precedence for the contemporary human right conventions that include protection of the vulnerable and the persecuted. What makes Ethiopia unique in the annals of Islamic history is that the Muslim refugees had lived peacefully with other Ethiopians and this was the basis for the flourishing of Islam in the country to the level it has reached now. King Asmha's acceptance of Islam makes Ethiopia not only a land of justice and enlightenment but also the first country where Islam got recognition by a head of state (The Document: 9).

A similar commentary on the significance of the Najashi narrative in the history of Islam was posted in the Network's website in the following way:

In Islamic history and tradition, Ethiopia is known as the "haven of the First Migration or Hijra". For Muslims, Ethiopia is synonymous with freedom from persecution and emancipation from fear. Ethiopia was a land where its king, Al-Najashi, was a person renowned for justice and in whose land human rights were cherished. The first migration of the Companions and relatives of the Prophet Muhammad to Ethiopia celebrates the birth of freedom of expression and beliefs, whereas, the Second migration of the prophet Muhammad to the medina celebrates the end of oppression.<sup>18</sup>

'It is for the first time that we Ethiopian Muslims started reconciling being Muslim and being Ethiopian,' according to one Ethiopian informant. 'For our forefathers reconciling both sounded a contradiction in terms'. Tracing the history of Islam to king Najashi thus helps the Ethiopian Muslims to negotiate their 'foreignness' as constructed by the dominant Christian population; a new foundation myth in reconstructing a national identity. In the communiqué it made on April 12, 2009 on the growing inter-faith tension, the Network, for instance, contested the EOC's nativist claim while asserting Islam's long presence in Ethiopia in the following manner:

It is to be noted that the Ethiopian state preceded all the Abrahamic religions. Well before the introduction of Christianity in Ethiopia in the 4th A.D the Axumite had already built a sophisticated non-Christian civilization. Like Christianity, Islam was also introduced from Ethiopia from the Middle East right while it was being established in Saudi Arabia. Any ownership claim of the Ethiopian state and its history is thus not only ahistorical but also poses danger to the peace and security of the country. Instead of engaging in the fruitless debate on first-comer/late-comer we should combat all forms of religious extremism and build our common nation.

Invoking the Najashi narrative is part of the Ethiopian Muslims' rights movement that centers on religious inclusion. This entails the redefinition of the parameters of Ethiopian national identity. The Najashi narrative thus addresses the issue of a secured sense of belonging. Referring to the hegemonic position of the EOC in the northern part of the country, the delegation has raised the issue of religious pluralism in Axum, stating that the EOC's exclusive claim could provoke reactive exclusive claims in areas where Muslims are the majority and cities such as Harar which are historic centers of Islamic civilization in Ethiopia.

#### *The call for autonomous community association*

The issue of a legitimate and functional Islamic community organization is one of the most contentious issues between the EPRDF and the Muslims. The lack of a representative organization has not only denied the Muslims a legitimate organization but also makes the EPRDF's drive to control 'Islamic fundamentalism' unattainable because the Islamic leadership in Ethiopia is divided and unaccountable, further making Ethiopian Muslims vulnerable to imported visions' of Islam from various external sources. Religious radicalization among the Ethiopian Muslim youth is also a function of

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<sup>18</sup> Najib Mohammed, The Haven of the First Hijra: An African nation is the Muslims' first refuge, ([http://www.ethiopianmuslims.net/Islam\\_in\\_Ethiopia/African%25Nation.htm](http://www.ethiopianmuslims.net/Islam_in_Ethiopia/African%25Nation.htm)).

the leadership crisis. As one of the leaders of the Ethiopian Muslims diaspora noted, 'the youth are no longer respecting the supreme council. They get their answers for their questions from outside of the country. We were told by the Mejlis leaders that the youth are getting *fatwa*, i.e., religious decree from other countries. Somebody who may have some qualm or grudge against Ethiopia, who wants to divide Ethiopian Muslims might exploit the situation. The government cannot do anything about this because you cannot legislate behavior in certain ways'<sup>19</sup>. As such, one of the leading issues which the 2007 delegation of Ethiopia Muslims diaspora raised to the Prime Minister was the issue of organizational autonomy, a theme which has been persistently noted by the diaspora outlets afterwards:

Among the fundamental rights Muslims denied off for centuries is the right to organize and establish institutions. One of the 13 demands raised during the 1966 Muslims demonstration was this basic right. To this date this demand is awaiting proper response. Worse, the sole institution that claims to represent Muslims and operates in their name has so far proved to rather working against Muslims themselves. It is now understood that the so called Islamic affairs councils from federal level down to Woreda are serving as peripherals of the security with the mission to suppress all forms of right claims by Muslims and pre-empt any such future aspirations.<sup>20</sup>

The diaspora also seek to establish NGOs that contribute to economic development particularly in the peripheral areas of the country, most of which have Muslim majority populations. In so doing they also evoke the constitutional freedom of association:

Cognizant of the country's limited economy, NGOs could play an important role in the development process. As it stands there are many Christian NGOs brought together under the umbrella of the Christian relief and Development Agency (CRDA) whereas the few Muslim NGOs operate under strong government control. This institutional imbalance tends to reinforce the marginalization of the Muslims. A government which claims to be a change agent is expected to redress this imbalance, whereas the institutional imbalance has made the Muslims more vulnerable to poverty and psychological distress. And these are fertile ground for external players with malicious intensions (the Document: 11).

According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, there are 1,119 NGOs (978 local and 141 international) operating in the country. The Christian Relief and Development Association (established in 1973) alone has 321 member organizations (230 local and 91 international). Forty four organizations (29 local and 15 international) operate under Evangelical Church Fellowship of Ethiopia. The Ethiopian Orthodox on its part has more than 600 organizations. The number of Muslim organizations throughout the country, both local and international, however, is numbered in tens. Even the only well-known relief organization, Ethiopian Muslims Relief and Development Association (EMRDA), operates under CRDA.

The quest for constitutionally enshrined freedom of religious associations is one of the major areas of consensus between Ethiopian Muslims in the homeland and in the diaspora. This strong fit between homeland realities and diasporic representation

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<sup>19</sup> Dr Zaki Abdullahi Sherif, Badr chairman, Interview in Reporter Newspaper, March 6, 2007.

<sup>20</sup> Dilemma of Ethiopian Muslims amidst Mounting Right Abuses, Negashi OJ. Posted on April 20th, 2009 by Aqibaw Yimer (<http://blog.ethiopianmuslims.net/negashi/?p=353>).

challenges one of the conventional wisdoms in transnational studies: that long distance nationalisms tend to be radically detached from local realities because the diaspora actors are not directly affected by the consequences of their (discursive) action. As it is already pointed out, the delegation worked hard to genuinely represent local issues and it has managed to do so through a thorough investigation of the issues at stake before it organized the official visit. The homelander have also participated in setting the agenda in various forms.

The Muslims quest for a representative organization, however, does not sit well with EPRDF's project of total control over society and the political process (Clapham 2009: Aalen and Tronvoll 2009). Besides, the EPRDF led post-1991 political order in Ethiopia is built on an ethnic edifice. Although the Constitution has guaranteed religious freedom and equality it does not allow the political expression of religion. In fact, religious and other non-ethnic organizations have gradually and systematically been brought under state control. Not only that the Mejlis has failed to evolve independently of the government, it has also actively sought to block the emergence of alternative Muslim organizations. The attempt by the diaspora groups to be an alternative Islamic voice was actively frustrated by the Mejlis. The recent Civil Society Law is providing a new legal framework that inhibits the growth and autonomy of the civil society. Although other religious groups and civil organizations are also contesting the government's growing encroachments into civil liberties, this has touched the Muslims more than others because a representative organization is one of the central factors in their quest for a national Islamic identity. The Muslim diaspora's attempt to bridge the organizational gap is frustrated when the delegation was denied to open a liaison office in the homeland irrespective of the promise made by the Prime Minister in 2007. The rejection is justified by the government in reference to the new CSO law according to which local NGOs which get more than 10 per cent of their income from foreign sources, and Ethiopian diaspora organization licensed in a foreign country cannot engage in 'political domains' such as rights advocacy. Retrospectively Badr and the Network now doubt the sincerity of the government during the discussions with the delegation. After all, the objective of the delegation was reported in the government media as if it were to partake in the millennium festivity<sup>21</sup>.

### *Contesting assertive secularism*

By and large two brands of secularism are identified in the literature, dubbed the US and French models. These models of secularism have distinct normative backgrounds and policy recommendations. Kuru (2009: 3-5) calls these two types "passive" (US model) and "assertive" (French model) secularism: 'Passive secularism allows for the public visibility of religion. It requires that the state play a "passive" role in avoiding the

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<sup>21</sup> 'A nine-member group of Ethiopian Muslims in Diaspora arrived here to hold talks with government officials on ways of enabling the members of the Muslim communities living abroad to actively participate in the celebration of the Ethiopian millennium' (ETV, April 8, 2007). For the critic of the Network against the government's representation see *Muslims' Issues are Far Fundamental than Millennium Celebration* <http://blog.ethiopianmuslims.net/negashi/>, Posted on April 21st, 2007.

establishment of any religions. Assertive secularism, on the other hand, excludes religion from the public sphere. It demands that the state plays an “assertive” role as the agent of a social engineering project that confines religion to the private domain'. Although the making of the Ethiopian Constitution was highly influenced by the American model (Mateei 1995), the government's religious policy echoes more the French variety of assertive secularism than the American passive secularism. This could well be related to the Marxist background of the EPRDF, which hastily went through an ideological conversion in favor of liberal democracy at the wake of its seizure of political power in 1991. The diaspora contest EPRDF's assertive secularism in two ways. For one, they seek a flexible interpretation of secularism that suits the country's diverse religious communities. They argue that Ethiopia with diverse cultures should have been able to design alternative approaches and strategies on the practice of religion in public institutions. Individuals and groups should be free to choose and practice one or a set of the strategies and alternatives provided that they do not override the rights of others. They furiously contest the 2008 directive of the Ministry of Education, which was developed without adequate public consultation and appears to be a short-term solution for a very complex issue that needs to be addressed on long-term basis.

The Network has issued statements denouncing the unconstitutional nature of the directive: 'Various regulations put in place at different times have removed the very sense of having equality of religion and the freedom to belief in the country. The directive that is aimed at governing religious practices in educational institutions is one such measure the government has taken and one that effectively put this basic service out from the reach of Muslim'<sup>22</sup>. As a diaspora Muslim scholar has recently noted (Abdulkadir 2008: 5-8), the Indian model of secularism fits the Ethiopian condition more than the American: 'India has 'separation' in its proper aspect, such as there is no recognition to any State-religion, no power to establish any religion or teach any religious doctrine in exclusively state educational institutions. India allows religion and state to interact and intervene in each other's affairs within legally and judicially establish frameworks; the Indian secularism does not assume the total expulsion of religion from the societal or state affairs unlike the case is in Ethiopia, at least constitutionally. The Indian constitution, thus, warrants the treatment of all religions and religious denominations' with equality and without discrimination in all matters under its direct or indirect control. In addition to religious neutrality of the state and religious liberties of the people, the constitution of India incorporates a number of religion-based and religion-related provisions for particular communities. Furthermore, to give practical application of constitutionally guaranteed rights there is also a commission for minority groups, which oversees the enforcement of such rights. However, the Ethiopian constitution which provides for complete separation of state and religion would hardly allow religion and state to interact and intervene in each other's affairs. Accordingly, India's version of secularism and freedom of religion shows an appreciable balance of religious and secular interests.

While EPRDF maintains a 'strict' separation between state and religion, local political practices indicate that secularism is undermined by partisan government officials. The delegation, for instance, mentioned in the document the use of public offices to promote sectarian religious interest by taking the example of the leadership of the Benishangul-Gumuz regional state. The president Yaregal Ayisheshim, a born-again Christian, is said to have invited US-based evangelicals to 'spread the Gospel' in the region. Whether this is part of a wider government strategy to change the religious demography of the region, which has in recent times come under the influence of Islamists from the Sudan, is difficult to ascertain. But geo-politics is not ruled out. Bordering the Sudan, the Berta, the majority of the inhabitants of Benishangul-Gumuz, are Muslims with a cross-border settlement pattern<sup>23</sup>. The various postings by the church groups, principally the Blair Foundation, as well as the fieldwork I carried out in Asosa, the regional capital, in April 2009 corroborate the diaspora's claim of the Christian clout in the religious affairs of the region<sup>24</sup>.

### *Religious conflict resolution*

One of the enduring legacies of the delegation is the peace it brokered between the feuding *ulama* and the way it eased the simmering sectarian tension among the Ethiopian Muslims. At the time the delegation arrived in the country, the *ulama* were divided between 'the Sufi' and 'the Wahhabi' camps. The significance of the delegation in diffusing the tension lies in creating a neutral forum to sort out theological differences peacefully. The delegation established a peace committee of 20 people – nine each from both camps and a neutral body consisting of two Muslim scholars from Addis Ababa University<sup>25</sup>. The two scholars were tasked to identify the contentious issues. They came up with 29 points of differences after an extensive public consultation. Both camps have recognized only nine issues as significant points of difference. These are related to the legitimacy of particular rituals and religious practices such as *mawlid* (whether or not to celebrate the Prophet's birth date), collective *du'a* after a *ja'ama salat* and *awliya* (saint-veneration). The 18 people from both camps were asked to write position papers to explain and justify their respective stances on the contentious issues. The committee set binding rules for the debate, i.e., that all issues would be discussed within the framework of the four Islamic schools of thought. The discussion was held once in a week for three months and the membership was expanded into 35 people. This debating forum came to be known as the Addis Ababa Ulama Unity Forum (AUUF).

The AUUF managed to strike a compromise between the two camps on some of the contentious issues, and for the rest they have agreed to accommodate or tolerate their

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<sup>23</sup> The Berta, the ethnic majority in the region, are exclusively Muslims whereas there are groups of Muslim among the Gumuz, the second largest ethnic group. The National Islamic Front - Sudan's Islamists - attempted to infiltrate the exclusively Muslim population of the Berta in the early 1990s. This resulted in the downfall of the Berta-dominated regional state of Benishangul-Gumuz and its replacement by a Gumuz dominated leadership.

<sup>24</sup> In its February 2009 issue, *Addis Vision*, the organ of the EPRDF, also acknowledged government partisanship in religious affairs in some of the regional states as well as at the federal level.

<sup>25</sup> The Sufi camp was led by Haji Umer (Mufti of Ethiopia and head of Addis Ababa Mejlis) and the 'Wahhabi' camp was represented by Dr Jelal. Ethnically they are respectively Amhara and Oromo.

differences. On the issue of saint veneration, for instance, the Sufi defended the legitimacy of visiting and reciting the Quran on the burial grounds of their loved ones or devout sheikhs to which the literalists conceded. On their part, the literalists rejected any intercession role assigned to the deceased which the Sufis accepted. Perhaps the greatest achievement of the AUUF is its moderating effect on the authenticity debate generated by the literalists and their scorn towards the Sufis. The AUUF managed to achieve that by historicizing the cultural embedment of the local Sufi traditions. Accordingly, credit was given to the traditional *ulama* that relentlessly worked to rescue and nourish Islam in Ethiopia under unfavorable political circumstances. Both groups have also agreed to adopt a more gradualist approach in educating the public about legitimate Islamic practices than the radical approach espoused by the literalists. The AUUF also proposed structural reforms regarding Islamic education in Ethiopia such as establishing a Da'awa research centre that authenticate the capability of those who can engage in missionary activities; a new curriculum for the national Islamic study, and a grading scale for the graduates from local centers of Islamic learning.

The Mejlis leadership felt threatened by AUUF's call for reform because many of them lack competence in sound Islamic knowledge. They are either political appointees or businessmen. It is no wonder, thus, that one of the first administrative measures taken by the new Mejlis leadership which came to power in April 2009 was to ban the AUUF and dismiss the leadership of the Addis Ababa Mejlis which had hosted the AUUF. Although the AUUF was abolished by the federal Mejlis, it had already set a model of conflict resolution. The Muslim community of Chagni area in the Amhara regional state, for instance, drew on the experience of the Forum in resolving a conflict between the Sufis and the literalists<sup>26</sup>. By and large, therefore, the delegation has mollified the rising tension generated by the confrontation between the locally entrenched Sufis and the globally resourced Salafis, an encounter which has often resulted in violent confrontations elsewhere in the world. On the other hand, unlike the democratic initiative that the AUUF was, the Mejlis had failed to take similar conflict resolution measures within the Muslim community. In fact, many Muslims believe that the Mejlis itself was intimately implicated in the conflict situation.

The Ethiopian Muslim diaspora leadership has noted on several occasions the dangers of religious conflicts for the survival of the nation, and the need to establish an early warning system that diffuses the potential for conflict. As the head of the delegation noted, 'the recent religious conflicts are minor hiccups. But all major hiccups spring up from minor hiccups. We have to address this issue at the root level at this time. We should not wait until it becomes humongous for us to tackle. If it becomes cancerous and if it has metastasized, it might spread to the all regions and engulf all the country'<sup>27</sup>. Subsequently, the delegation visited hotspots of recent religious conflicts, such as Jimma and Tigray. In Trigay it discussed the issue of religious exclusion with the political leadership of the regional state. Before heading to Ethiopia, the delegation had even organized an inter-faith dialogue with church leaders in the diaspora. Leaders of

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<sup>26</sup> Interview with Hassan Taju, facilitator of the AUUF, Addis Ababa, November 12, 2009.

<sup>27</sup> Dr Zaki Abdullahi Sherif, Badr chairman, Interview in Reporter Newspaper, March 6, 2007.

the delegation highlighted in this dialogue the common grounds between Islam and *Ahl al-Kitab*/'Peoples of the Book' (Jews and Christians):

Before we got here [Ethiopia] we had an inter-faith dialogue in the US. They [the church leaders] had the same feelings that we had. They said that it is a blessing that we came. They had no idea of how to raise the issue... we gave a presentation at the dialogue. In Islam People of the Book are those who follow Jesus and Moses. So Jesus and Christians are akin to us. We are cousins. Here is so much in common to talk about.<sup>28</sup>

This is different from the homeland polemical theological debate that highlights the difference between the two religions rather than their common grounds. Unfortunately, the planned dialogue with the Christian leadership at homeland did not take place. The Orthodox Church expressed interest to hold a dialogue but unfortunately it failed to contact the delegation. The Network and other Muslim diaspora organizations are very critical of the way the government handles or instrumentalizes inter-faith conflict for political purposes. Aware of the alternative language of violence espoused by some fringe elements on both the Christian and Muslim sides, the Network has framed the issue in the rights language.

One of the unique and remarkable features of the Network's second conference was the special plenary session that deliberated on the Nejashi Model of Interfaith Understanding<sup>29</sup>. The plenary session was one of the events that created interaction beyond Ethiopians and Muslims themselves. Panelists, Professor Sami Zamni of Ghent University (Belgium) and Professor Ahmed Moen of Howard University (USA), each emphasized the value of having such a model at a time and in a world where misunderstanding and suspicion command actions. Representatives from the Sudan and Somaliand Communities in Belgium acknowledged the value the cordial relationship that existed between Prophet Mohammed and king Najashi has on promoting peace, understanding and cooperation in the Horn of Africa and far beyond. In a speech made at the end of the session, the Ambassador of Ethiopia to Belgium and the EU, Ato Berihane Gebre-Christos, appreciated the overall objectives of the conference, acknowledged the distorted history and called upon the Muslim community to engage in action to further address the Muslims' issues in a secular system. A representative of the Ethiopian Community in Belgium made an encouraging remark and told the participants that the Hijra to Ethiopia is a history that all Ethiopians – Muslims, Christians and others – should be proud of and thus be promoted by each, both in their own way as well as in a joint action.

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<sup>28</sup> Dr Zakir, Interview in Reporter Newspaper, March 6, 2007. This resonates with Ja'far Abu Talib's, the leader of the Prophet's companions who migrated to Axum in 615 AD, rhetoric of highlighting the common grounds between Islam and Christianity in reference to during their debate with the Qurayish mediated by the king of Axum (cf. the Sura of Meriam and Issa).

<sup>29</sup> Public statement on the Second Annual Conference, Network of Ethiopian Muslims in Europe, [www.ethiopianmuslims.net](http://www.ethiopianmuslims.net).

## 9. Conclusion

Muslims in contemporary Ethiopia are actively engaged in contesting their age-old socio-political marginalization. The discussion in the previous sections has amply demonstrated the legitimate bases of their rights-movement. The discursive and practical engagements of the Muslims diaspora are a part of this rights movement. The Ethiopian Muslims at home and in the diaspora are actively engaged in public reasoning in the form of disclosing the continued existence of structures of religious inequality and seeking acknowledgement from the dominant Christian establishment and the Ethiopian government. This public discourse is an important asset to promote religious tolerance and peaceful-co-existence, for the alternative is to resort to other (violent) mechanisms of redress. As Maclure (2003: 8) noted, 'the driving back of certain types of claims outside the sphere of public reason encourages the creation of counter-publics devoted to social destabilization and fragmentation rather than to political reformation'.

The following is a summary of the activities of the Muslims diaspora and its contributions to religious peaceful coexistence in Ethiopia and peace building in general.

### *Setting agendas for the Muslims rights movement*

Avoiding the victimology trap, the Ethiopian Muslims are not stuck with past injustices but are engaged in reforming contemporary Ethiopian society for a better future. This is important not only for the Muslim community at home, whose identity politics is largely diffused and lack legitimate leadership, but also for reforming the Ethiopian polity at large.

### *Juridification of protest in the struggle for recognition*

The use of the rights language in reference to the country's constitution and international conventions is an important asset in the struggle with fringe groups that have adopted the language of violence in the politics of recognition.

### *Conflict resolution among the homeland ulama*

Over a decade, the Ethiopian Muslims were divided between the so-called Sufi and Salafi/Wahhabi camps. The hostility that ensued between the two had resulted in sectarian violence in some parts of the country. The delegation moderated the polemical theological debate through the creation of an *ulama* unity forum where compromises were made and civility was assured to accommodate doctrinal differences. The delegation also sought to reach out to the Christian establishments to foster inter-faith dialogue at a time when religious conflicts were on the rise.

### *The call for the reconstruction of national identity on inclusive basis*

Ethiopian national identity has long equated with the Orthodox Church, while religious minorities such as Muslims were integrated to the nation as 'internal others'. It is no wonder thus the nation has been narrated from the perspective of the dominant religious group. One of the discursive practices of the Muslim diaspora has therefore focused on renegotiating the Muslims' 'foreignness' by highlighting the antiquity of Islam

in Ethiopia. This discursive engagement of the diaspora is an instance of the active reconstruction of 'a nation from below', rather than a discourse of victimhood towards which the politics of most minorities is often oriented. The peace dividends of such forward-looking discourse provide are obvious, for reconstruction of national identity on inclusive bases is crucial for ensuring structural peace. In fact, a wider sense of national belonging is one of the structural factors for political stability and social integration. The identity politics of the Ethiopian Muslims has unleashed a new sense of national belonging among the country's historic minority. Focusing on integrative narratives such as the Najashi, the Ethiopian Muslims in diaspora are active players in (re)constructing the Ethiopian nation from below on an inclusive basis.

*The quest for freedom of association and organizational autonomy to enhance the wider game of democratic politics*

The quest for an autonomous organization has exposed the control-driven nature of the Ethiopian state across political regimes. Attending to this dimension of the Muslims rights-movement takes one to the broader appeals for the democratization of the Ethiopian polity. The Ethiopian Muslim rights movement, like any other social movement, has certain limitations. One of these limitations is the fact that it is so far largely self-contained. This might be the case because it is still at its formative stage focusing more on formulating issues and advancing the interest of Muslims vis-a-vis other religious groups than creating linkages with democratic voices. Partly because of the negative reactions from the Christian population and the tight control by the government, the Muslims' rights movement has also not yet fully enriched an all-inclusive public reasoning on issues related to democratic citizenship. But the future is bright, as educational networking in and beyond Ethiopia advances.

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