

# Islam, the Nature of Peace and State Society Relations in Contemporary Ethiopia; Implications for National Integration

Mohammed Yimer

Department of Civics and Ethical Studies, Arba Minch University  
PO box 21, Arba Minch, Ethiopia

## Abstract

An attempt has been made to assess the nature of peace, religion and society in Ethiopia, to examine the conflict emerging trends in the post 1991 Ethiopia and its implications for national integration and to identify the underlying causes, actors, and consequences of the conflict. Adopting ethnographic design, the study could secure substantial data through, key informant interview and focus group discussions with key stakeholders. Apart from this, the study was substantiated by critical document analysis. The study indicated that an official policy change has been observed in terms of interference, dichotomization and accusations for alleged radicalizing activities of Ethiopian Muslims. While this is considered as eroding the basic features and foundations of the constitution, it has its own implication on the ideology of secular state model. Although the policy of containing Islam has been started earlier, the regime has moved to replace, shape, and educate the ordinary Muslims along with the ideology of a new sect imported from Lebanon with the intention of curbing perceived extremism in Ethiopia. The study further revealed that the recent confrontation between the state and the Muslim community commenced since 2011 has put a repercussion on three interrelated issues. The growing interference of the government in religious affairs, the violation of the ever secular constitution thereof and the deterioration of the state and the Muslim community relations, which will have a great implication on the longstanding agenda of the state to create one political and economic community.

**Keywords:** Islam, Ethiopian Muslims, Post 1991 era, Terrorism, EPRDF, state -society relations

## Introduction

At various times in modern history, Ethiopia's Muslims have faced systematic forms of discrimination, ranging from "benign neglect" to outright persecution and forced conversion to Orthodox Christianity. Muslims have been made to suffer from marginalization, discrimination, oppression, and underrepresentation, especially in the country's economic and political institutions (Miftah, 2015; Ahmed, 1994). However, the country has a long history of religious tolerance and its constitution protects freedom of religion and provides for separation of religion and state. As such, there were no clearly reported religious domestic threats in the country. Islamist threats to Ethiopia's security are primarily external, coming from Somalia and Sudan (AFPC, 2013). While almost all Muslims in Ethiopia are Sunni, with a plurality, if not a majority, adhering to one or another Sufi *tariqa*<sup>1</sup> and that until the modern period, interactions between Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia have been relatively cordial. Unprecedented in the history of human race, the two major religious communities (Muslim & Christian) have been promoting peace among their followers in Ethiopia. However, relations between the state and the Muslim community are not being seen in a business as usual scenario in the contemporary Ethiopia. This relation increasingly appeared to be distorted following attempts state interventions into its religious affairs (BTI, 2016). The ruling party's success in formerly disadvantaged regions of the country is partly attributable to greater religious tolerance and pluralism.

## Statement of the problem

Though the relations between the Christian and Muslim communities in Ethiopia were expressed as cordial (AFPC, 2013), the state policies and practices were directed against Muslims, in which the net result has been peripheralization (Miftah, 2015) of the country's significant segment of Muslim population. The successive kings of Abyssinia commenced from the era of Tewodros II and their antagonistic policies towards Islam and Muslims led the marginalization of Muslims from the development arena in many respects. It has been most frequently discussed at various times in modern history, Ethiopia's Muslims have faced systematic forms of discrimination, ranging from "benign neglect" to outright persecution and forced conversion to Orthodox Christianity (USIP, 2007; Zewude, 1990; Ahmed, 1993). Having the various repercussions of these policies ranging from marginalization up to diminished self perception, strangeness and a feeling of alienation (Ahmed, 1993; Miftah, 2015; Zewude, 1990) gone un noticed, the very recent actions of state and non state actors has led to the deterioration of state society relations (Fentaw, 2012) in the country. An official report by (USIP, 2007) stated that although many Ethiopian citizens strongly defend the historic peace between Muslim and Christian communities, they are uncomfortable with the visible growth of Muslim worship. Following the political transition in 1990s, the

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<sup>1</sup> Order

Ethiopian Muslims started to breathe an air of equality at least in textual sense (constitutional provisions guaranteeing equality) and practically to some extent. The ruling party's success in this regard, particularly in formerly disadvantaged regions of the country is partly attributable to greater religious tolerance and pluralism (USIP, 2007). Another study by (Haustein and Østebø, 2011) witnessed that when the EPRDF ousted the *Derg* in 1991, religious liberties were quickly introduced at an unprecedented scale. However, this situation could not stay for so long. Following the terror-attacks on 9/11 and increased geopolitical tensions in the region spurred increased concern from the ruling party, and Ethiopian Muslims were publicly accused of aspiring to political power based on radical religious ideas (Ibid). While there were no signs of significant threat from the domestic arena (AFPC, 2013; Yimer, 2015), the EPRDF's fear of Islam was exacerbated by the increasing strength of Islamist insurgents in Somalia, and the political takeover by the United Islamic Courts in June 2006 sparked concern over its potential effects on Ethiopia's Muslim population (Haustein and Østebø, 2011). While no clear symptom of terrorist act, the government's response came in the form of undertaking several measures which actually intended to protect an improbable takeover of governmental power by political Islam (Fentaw, 2012). The increasing interference of the ruling party through the council which finally ranged to inviting other sects called Ahabash from Lebanon, led to violent conflicts throughout every corner of the country in 2012 and the subsequent periods.

## 2. Objectives of the study

1. To assess the nature of peace, religion and society in Ethiopia
2. To examine the post 1991 conflict emerging trends in Ethiopia and implications for national integration
3. To identify the underlying causes, actors, and consequences of the conflict.

## 3. Methodology

The study is based on qualitative design based on ethnographic model. Several studies in the same and most of the related topics are undertaken in a qualitative design (Jon, 2014; Ahmed, 2006; Miftah 2014; Haustein and Østebø, 2011), as they are not suitable for quantification. Based on the nature of the study, two particular primary data gathering tools, namely focus group discussions and Interview were used. Focus group discussions were held among the members of Ethiopian Islamic Affairs and some selected mosques in Dessie, Addis Ababa and Assasa, where violent conflicts have been occurred<sup>1</sup>.

In-depth interviews with the Ministry of Federal and Pastoral Affairs and imams of six mosques from the aforementioned areas were employed for collecting substantive information on the nature of state society relations, Islam and Muslims across the different regimes in Ethiopia, post 1991 conflicts, actors and several other topics. However, many interviewees feared repercussions if their names were revealed, particularly the imams. For this reason, the names of all interviewees have been withheld. In some cases, the location of interviewees has also been withheld to avoid endangering them. In addition, it draws massive data from scholarly works, reports, policy documents and briefs, where findings, concerning actors, causes, consequences and policy implications were drawn.

## 4. Conceptual Framework on State Society Relations, Socio-Political Cohesion and the nature of Peace building

The concept of state-society relations and efforts to foster positive, mutually constructive relations has thus received greater attention. It could be expressed in terms of restoring or generating trust in government and public institutions and trust among citizens; and fostering notions of citizenship and socio-political cohesion (Haider, 2011). This implies the fact that an instrument to foster a positive relationship between the people and the state is trust in government and its workings, which in turn develop a sense of citizenship or belongingness to the state and socio-political cohesion. In its literary meaning, the term citizenship (strong allegiance to the state) entails, how people perceive the state, and how the state perceives them, and this shapes what it means to be a citizen.

In situations of fragility, political identity, fragmentation and weak state institutions reinforce each other. They undermine state legitimacy and the formation of genuine national integration; weaken interpersonal trust; and divide citizens. In situations of violent conflict, processes of 'othering' and dehumanization destroy social relations and networks and leave a legacy of deep mistrust and fear of others. Persistent divisions in the aftermath of conflict result in an unstable peace and the possibility of renewed violence (Haider, 2010).

Weak social cohesion and distrust also impact negatively on perceptions of political community and on civic action. People are reluctant to engage with the 'other', hindering the development of civic engagement and collective action. In addition, fear and insecurity and feelings of powerlessness and marginalization from conflict can also weaken a sense of individual civic agency<sup>2</sup>. Where the state is involved in violence and repression, whether as a perpetrator, by active complicity or passive omission, such sentiments can be more pronounced. In addition

<sup>1</sup>.Amnesty International Report 2014.

<sup>2</sup>.State society relations and citizenship in situations of conflict and fragility, topic guild supplement, GSDRC, April 2016.

to withdrawing from citizenship, citizens may also respond to or cope with violence by establishing parallel governance or security structures. These can further weaken the legitimacy of state institutions and exacerbate intergroup divisions where such parallel structures cater solely to specific groups<sup>1</sup>.

For the purpose of this article, it is crucial to see it in terms of how the Muslim community can recover from episodes of state violence. The nature of grievances and demands in a conflict is central to the analyses of Svensson (2007) and Fox (2003). Fox argues that ‘when religious issues are important, they will change the dynamics of the conflict’, (2003, 125). This can be attributed both to the role of religious institutions within the state and to the way in which religion influences international intervention in ethnic conflict. Internally, religious institutions tend to facilitate a reaction if the grievances have religious importance; however, if they have no religious importance the religious institutions often inhibit protest. As discussed in several parts of this article, the controversy since 2011 has a devastating effect on the lives of citizens. Several died, others imprisoned, and the rest got exiled. However, the violence didn’t end up here. Hatred, enmity, and generally ‘no war no peace’ relationship is prevailed between the Muslim society and the state (USCIRF, 2014). Svensson (2007) argues that across religions, where the grievances or demands are based on explicit religious claims, the negotiated settlement of conflict is less likely to succeed than if there are no religious claims. The post 2011 era, therefore, is characterized by mistrust, weak or forced belongingness, and consequently weak socio-political cohesion, and hostile relations between the society and the state, which finally leads to state fragility. Thus, mechanisms of recovery should be established in conflict stricken settings.

Therefore, key principles for sustainable violence prevention and recovery are: inclusion, early results to help build citizen confidence; establishing the basic institutional functions that provide citizen security, justice; and embracing pragmatic, best-fit options to address immediate challenges (Ibid). Thus, specific mechanisms tailored towards the psycho-social recovery of war- torn Muslim society need to be in place. Compromise and conflict-resolution could be seen as an integral part of political life, which will also enhance general welfare<sup>2</sup>.

### **5.1 State Society Relations in Ethiopia**

Islam had no room in the Ethiopian political tradition, and Muslims were considered as second class citizens until the downfall of the imperial regime in 1974. Though the entire history of Islam was under domination, the relationship was extremely cordial and the Christian Muslim intimacy was absolutely unique from any part of the world. However, this kind of harmonious relationship was not seen between the state and the Muslims. There was an asymmetric relationship between Christian highland kingdom and Muslims, in which the former controlled the main political institutions (Ostebo, 2008; Ahmed, 2006) and defined the latter as second-class citizens. Always a significant but institutionally disadvantaged minority (CGAF, 2016), the Muslim population has grown in relative terms in recent decades. Although, EPRDF improved rights for Muslims initially, but it has intervened more deeply in Muslim affairs in recent years, imposing increasing restrictions on a community that has grown to rival the Orthodox Church in size. This has helped alienate some Muslims from the government (BTI, 2016). As cited in (Feyssa and Lawrence, 2014), Ostebo has convincingly shown in his in-depth analysis of the dynamics of religious identification in contemporary Ethiopia that although Islam does not have a political agenda in Ethiopia, the perception that it has informed government policy and needs to be corrected: “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.

In contemporary Ethiopia, constitutional violation in terms of religious interference is not an exception; despite the formal commitment in the constitution for, a government under the law and judicial independence, there are still widespread violations of laws by government officials and infringements on such constitutionally guaranteed rights as freedom of association, press, speech, and others. While these issues promised by the federal constitution, could be negotiated early, remain largely ignored. All these issues imply that the Ethiopian State has not substantially moved away from its traditions of using coercion and deceit in order to maintain control over its diverse population. Hence, State and society relationships in Ethiopia today are mainly characterized by the hegemonic control of the masses (or the majority) by the few who maintain control over the State and its economic and military assets.

### **5.2 Religious Diversity in Ethiopia**

While there were no signs of religious diversity and equality in the entire history of the imperial Ethiopia, the Derg brought a radical change in the status quo that was likely to favor Islam (Ahmed, 2006) and enable it to attain a status of equality with Christianity, which had always been perceived as a state religion. This was a significant departure for Islam and Muslims in the history of the country. It was also during this time that the Ethiopian

<sup>1</sup>. For these and related issues, see: [gsdrc.org/topic-guides/conflict/](http://gsdrc.org/topic-guides/conflict/) and [gsdrc.org/topic-guides/fragile-states/](http://gsdrc.org/topic-guides/fragile-states/)

<sup>2</sup>. See the study by István Benczes and Balázs Szent-Iványi, State–society relations in a dynamic framework: The case of the Far East and Sub-Saharan Africa

Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (ESCIA) popularly known as Mejlis, was formally established in 1976. The constitution of the next era, the 1995 FDRE constitution made a significant departure from its predecessors. Diversity of religion and ethnicity, among others were officially institutionalized and mechanisms were in place for extraordinary valuation.<sup>1</sup> The constitution, in its article 11, fairly guaranteed the official separation of state and religion. It declares the 'separation of religion and state', assures there is 'no state religion and above all, strongly demands that 'the state shall not interfere in religious matters and religion shall not interfere in state affairs'.

According to the U.S. government report, the total population of the country is estimated to be 93.9 million as of July 2013. The report further explains the religious demography of the country using 2007 census. Thus, it estimated that 44 percent of the population belongs to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC), 34 percent is Sunni Muslim, and 19 percent belongs to Christian evangelical and Pentecostal groups<sup>2</sup>.

### 5.3 Contending Views on Islam and Terrorism

Although a study by (Galtung 2014) noted that different religions have different degrees of potential to promote peace, it clearly acknowledges that there is no automatic connection between the belief system of a specific religion and the use of force by its followers. The prevalent discourse of the violent force of religion, however, is a myth that has been constructed by Western societies to legitimize their existence; and this myth is used to justify violence perpetrated by the West against Islamic societies (Canaugh 2009). Having the definition by themselves and exploiting such opportunities, popular commentaries facilely point to the ideological sources of conflict, maintaining that the Qur'an is inherently violent and that all forms of Islamism are nothing but an antecedent of violence, terrorism and totalitarianism particularly since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. In fact, most contemporary suicide attacks (1981-2008) can be attributed to jihadist groups' (Moghadam 2009), the escalation of violence carried out in the name of Islam must be attributed to a combination of factors where contextual variables, individual psychologies and opportunity structures in a society are central (Hafez 2003; Jackson and Gunning 2011; Mandeville 2007; Wiktorowicz 2005a). Equally important notion here is radicalization, which many argues that it led to extremism and terrorism. Despite the existing rumors and emotionally loaded speeches of the western society leaders, there is no empirical evidence concerning what the path of radicalization is, whether religion, particularly Islam is responsible for it and the red line to demarcate radicalization from what is not. A study by (Aly and Striegher 2012), synthesized based on trial evidence of the first convicted Islamist terrorist in Australia come to the conclusion that 'religion plays a far lesser role in radicalization toward violent extremism than the (counterterrorism) policy response contends'. However, the existing literatures urge us to see the dynamics against the backdrop of societal and global transformations and their repercussions on individual identities (Roy 2004; Wiktorowicz 2005a; Coolsaet 2011; Schmid 2013). Therefore, the conclusion is, and of course the fact that radical jihadist groups resort to Islamic sources to justify their violent acts cannot, on its own, prove that Islam is inherently violent.

### 5.4 The Culture of Peace and Co-Existence among the Ethiopian Society

Despite the chauvinistic nature of the imperial statuesque, the social life of the people was always harmoniously interactive. Following the demise of the imperial regime in 1974, the Ethiopian Muslims were granted landownership right in 1975 land proclamation. The subsequent regime, EPRDF, further improved the trend and acknowledged Muslims as legal cultural group. This could not stay long due to ridiculous reasons. The growing presence of Muslims in public offices and the mushrooming of mosques all over the country were repeatedly forwarded as evidence for the claim that Ethiopian Muslims were aspiring for political power based on radical religious ideas (Ostebo, 2013).

The following discussion is quite telling concerning the peaceful coexistence and the culture of peace in a multicultural context.

*Now, I am 94 years old. I have passed in three reigns. I have gone several countries in Europe and the middle east and able to see the nature of relationship among the different cultural groups. Unlike these countries, where I made frequent tours, Ethiopia has a society with a formidably tolerant nature. Tolerance is nurtured in our society, and the society, which is highly diversified, could be considered as schools where the white people can take lessons. What should not left un noticed here is that, in every reign decrees were approved calling Ethiopian Muslims official conversion to Christianity. Christians were pressured to play their own role in the process. However, they hide Muslims in their home, while the securities search Muslims for jail. The Muslims, on the other hand, were loyal and humble for their Christian fellows. In the process, both Muslims and Christians lived together peacefully in the presence of an alarming pressure*

<sup>1</sup>. These include the establishment of religious courts, language policy, self administration and self representation rights of every nation, nationalities and people.

<sup>2</sup>. International Religious Freedom Report on Ethiopia, 2013.



*from their successive rulers.*

### **5.5 The post 1991 conflict between Muslims and the ruling party**

More than any other system, EPRDF brought unprecedented changes for the Muslim population in Ethiopia. The regime, among other things, ended restrictions on hajj, suspended the ban on imports of religious literature, and lifted the restriction on the construction of mosques and religious schools, which in turn paved the way for marked enthusiasm and boosted religious activities among the Muslims (Ibid). This policy produced relatively positive relations between the regime and the larger parts of the Muslim population.

However, the later developments could not be characterized as the beginning. Though humble in their nature, the pressures for the Ethiopian Muslims come from different directions. It is worthy of considering the idea that recently, Ethiopian Muslims have been suffering from increased pressure from the government, the EOC and the global community (Stockman ,2015). The government, for Ethiopian migrants killed in Libya by ISIS, has made a psychological pressure on Muslims in the country. Stockman further stated that the government and the EOC have been using the discourse of Islamic extremism more and more to justify their suspicion and crackdowns on the growing Islamic presence in Ethiopia. Ostebo, a well known researcher on Islamism and related issue in the horn of Africa, who himself has made countless trips to Ethiopia to do fieldwork in different regions of the country, witnessed that there are no signs of actual extremism or radicalization in the field (Østebø, 2013).

A field interview discussion result revealed a fact not different from Ostebo's finding.

*The controversy observed and its consequence between the Muslim society and the state is not due to terrorism. Because, if terrorism and its characteristics were seen in our society, we never tolerate it, as we are seeing what it mean in several occasions abroad. In our tangible situation, no bomb has been thrown or civilians were not targeted in any circumstance. Asking one's own freedom is considered as an act of terror, who else is not a terrorist? If terrorists were there, how it could be possible to stay peacefully, at least in the presence of bitter grievance? The protests were absolutely peaceful, targeted only on the respectation of the constitution. Although the government was highly unsuccessful in his frequent attempt to get a pretext using the state media, producing even documentary films, the people and international institutions are highly condemning as violation of human rights. Using the government's strategy of dichotomization of Muslims, however, other actors are attacking Islam and Muslims in a number of ways.*

A recent finding by (Ostebo, 2013) has put the reality of dichotomizing Muslims as follows.

“This effort to dichotomize and to promote “moderate” Islam has clearly been seen through the regime's engagement in the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC). This was clearly explained in the speeches of the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, as *Nebaru Islmna*, Salafism, Wuhabism,etc..“

### **5.6 Why Increasing Intolerance for Islam and Muslims?**

One of the reasons of neglecting and resisting the revival of Islam is fairly discursive; labeling all aspects of Islamic revival in Ethiopia as if it were a manifestation of so-called global Islamic fundamentalism (Feyissa and Lawrence, 2014). In this case there is some sort of misperception reflected among the people and even the policy discourses concerning fundamentalism. As Ahmed noted, “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. The second one is that the successive Ethiopian governments across political regimes have also tended to link Islamic revivalism in Ethiopia with external players, as if Muslims were a perennial source of national security threats (Ibid). This implies that there is an old image and ridiculous anxiety developed for centuries in the minds of the Abyssinian rulers and the entire public, though the nature of the relations between the Muslims and Christians in the country were harmonious, as described in several parts of this manuscript. By far, the most probable reason of the government for intolerance of Islam is tied with its geo-political strategic importance for US war on terror and an important ally for US project on counter terrorism which sensibly commenced since September 9/11 attack.

## **6 Actors in the post 2010 conflicts**

### **6.1 Ministry of Federal and Pastoral Affairs**

A separate department established to oversee the inter-religious dialogue and pastoral affairs in the post 1991 era. From July to December 2011, the Ethiopian Ministry of Federal Affairs and the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC) held mandatory “religious tolerance” trainings<sup>1</sup> for all imams and Islamic school teachers and administrators in the Addis Ababa and the Amhara, Harar, and Omiriyia regions (USCIRF 2013).

The interviews made among training participant imams in Addis, report the situation as follows;

*I, as an imam in a mosque and other sheiks were invited to take part in the training 10 days*

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<sup>1</sup> .The trainings were paid by the Ethiopian government.

*ahead of the training. We went as invited and attend it; An opening speech was made by a government authority concerning the perceived dangers of wuhhabism, Salafism and extremism. He also spoke about the importance of the training for combating the anxieties in inculcating the virtues of a new training. The invited guests (foreigners) started to deliver the lecture in Arabic language. However, there was a rumor among almost all of the trainees concerning the contents, as some of them were unique to our Islamic tradition and others highly contradictory to what we know. But they warned us to keep silent. We did accordingly. One of the trainers finally informed us that they came from Lebanon through the invitation by the Ethiopian government. They also advised us to adopt this sect across the mosques and Madras's in Ethiopia.*

In the same vein, the USCIRF (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom) report, an institution always in charge of controlling religious situations through its chapter on Ethiopia, indicated that “in 2011 the government made efforts to impose a particular Islamic interpretation on the country’s Muslim community”. It further stated that the Ethiopian government has overreacted, prosecuting and cracking down on peaceful Muslim demonstrators protesting against government interference in the internal religious affairs of their community (USCIRF, 2014). From this, it is clear to see that the trainings were led by al-Ahbash clerics from Lebanon and were organized by the government to promote the al-Ahbash Islamic ideology.

Another interview made among two x-Imams in Dessie, revealed the same approach to the training, and contents of the training were fairly synonymous

*“An official from the Ministry of Federal and representatives made an introduction to the training concerning Wuhhabism extremism discourses and related issues. Then they left the stage for the trainers (people with Arabic nature). Arabic language was used as a medium of communication in the training. After estimated 30 minutes in the training, some of the trainees started to talk each other. However, since the representatives of the Mejlis informed at the beginning of the training not to ask questions of any kind over the contents of the teaching, nobody was able to ask any issue. We took the training and finished in two days. I asked one of the trainers in the tea break, however, concerning where they came and why. He informed me that they came from Lebanon with the invitation by the government of Ethiopia to teach their sect discourse to the Muslims in Ethiopia.”*

In his 2013 publication on Islam and state relation in Ethiopia, Ostebo also has clearly stated that the regime has quickly shifted its policy from containing Islam to producing its own “governmental Islam”. Similarly, USCIRF in its 2014 report has reported the situation at the aftermath of the training, Imams who refused to preach al-Ahbash ideology were dismissed from their positions and replaced with other imams, and some were jailed. The Aweliya Islamic School in Addis Ababa was closed in December 2011. Even in this time July 25/2016, about 300 selected male university students from each university have been invited for a training to indoctrinate the “government’s own sect” ideology. The witness also informed the researcher that it will be followed by female students on the next phase<sup>1</sup>. These students, after the successful completion of the training will be sent to the universities and try to train others there too. The informant did not hide the similar trends in this regard conducted last year and the subsequent reaction of these students to other students over doctrinal issues in different universities. Thus, it is equally responsible for the escalation of conflicts and the later developments likely to occur as a result of this.

## **6.2 Ethiopian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (ESCIA) Mejlis**

The ESCIA (Mejlis) since its establishment in 1976, through the voices from the Muslim intellectuals for quite a long period of time to institutionalize Islam, worked in the entire military regime only as a *defacto*, not *de jure*, organization (Ahmed, 2006; Feyissa and Lawrence, 2014). It failed to manage even key issues of Muslims in the post Derg era. Being an important apparatus of the government in deconstructing Islam and its legacy in the so called era of equality, even mosques are not established in some areas particularly Axum, the northern part of the country. In Axum, where the orthodox followers consider it as “sacred” area, even the constructed ones were forcefully destructed and zero response from the Mejlis. Corruption (financial, administrative and electoral), rivalry within the leadership of the Council (Ahmed, 2006), allegiance with the government till serving as an instrument, un democratic, un fair and un transparent electoral processes greatly undermined its credibility and claim to represent the Ethiopian Muslim community.

The interview result held among one of the Imams in Arba Minch on the electoral process, its activities, independence and credibility with the Muslim community is stated as follows.

*The Muslim community at first demanded the election to be held at the Mosques, suspecting that it will not be genuine. However, the government refused to do so. But, no one was present at the*

<sup>1</sup>. key informant interview in Addis Ababa 25/07/2015

*election districts. Immediately, the government further forced us to call the large Muslim community to go at each constituency and elect. If failed to do that, the government authorities warned us with emotionally charged words that we will face penalty. We worried a lot in the situation.*

Concerning this issue, the USCIRF in its chapter on Ethiopia, has indicated that while elections were held in September 2012, protestors denounced the elections' credibility, complaining of government interference and that those individuals voted into leadership positions did not reflect the preferences of the community (USCIRF, 2014). The report of the same institution in its chapter on the Horn of Africa, reported that in 2011-2012, in response to concerns about rising extremism, the government of Ethiopia imposed the al-Ahbash interpretation of Islam on the country's Muslim community, including through required training for imams; interfered in the independence of the community's representative body, the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC); and then arrested and prosecuted Muslims who opposed these actions and engaged in peaceful protests<sup>1</sup>.

Since the government's interference since 2011, many in the community no longer support and respect EIASC rather as government figureheads. Commencing from the 2011 controversy, the EIASC increased its regulation of the Muslim community. It issued two directives giving it greater oversight, and even ownership, of Ethiopia's mosques. The directives include detailed rules regulating the administration of mosques; give the EIASC authority to issue internal mosque regulations and appoint mosque employees<sup>2</sup>; and prohibit public meetings, speeches and preaching, and fundraising events without the EIASC's written approval<sup>3</sup> (Ibid). Ostebo, while explaining the extremely unsacred matrimony of the council, indicated that "while similar links between Islamic councils and political regimes have been observed in other parts of East Africa, the Ethiopian case reveals more explicit involvement by the authorities, something which became evident after 1995. In the election of a new council in January 2004, for example, the voting session was attended by a representative from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Østebø 2012)."

### **6.3 Prominent Leaders (Established Committees) of the Muslim Community**

These committees were selected by the protestors over the interference of the government in the 2011/12 incidence. They were proposed to solve the controversy in a peaceful manner with the government. They were known for their religious services in the community and with a personality of high caliber. However, On July 6 and August 3, 2015 respectively, the Ethiopian government convicted and sentenced 18 leaders of the 2012 Muslim protest movement. The worst act was the conviction of the committees "plotting to institute an Islamic government" and sentenced to seven to 22 years in prison under Ethiopia's controversial Anti-Terror Proclamation. This act of the government and its use of the Anti-Terror Proclamation to silence critics have been criticized by the U.S officials and human rights.<sup>4</sup>

The post 1991 EPRDF project war on terror, commenced with dichotomizing the peace loving Muslim society, has resulted in a number of far reaching consequences on security and human right. Despite the criticism by some intellectuals, frequent attempts of the government to abolish images of the Muslim society result in a growing suspicion within Ethiopian society. Ethiopian Muslims are increasingly scrutinized. The worst action, as many condemned, is the documentary film called *Jihaday Harakat*, prepared and presented by the state media. This film is a calculated move of the regime, targeted to distract the cherished values of the Ethiopian society and ultimately portraying Muslims as a huge threat to other fellow religions and the Ethiopian state in general. Several studies like (Stockman 2015; Ostebo, 2013; USCIRF, 2014) have indicated that the film is really disastrous for the Muslims and for their Christian fellows, and on their citizenship of "othering" Muslims. Stockman, for instance, stated that "the film is especially worrying for Ethiopian Muslims because their peaceful movement is portrayed as extremist and radical. Although the goal of *Harekat* was to generate moral panic -which serves as the fabric of social control-, to portray the EPRDF as protector and to create division within the Muslim community, it actually resulted in a lot of criticism from all parts of Ethiopia."

### **7. The Questions over government intervention in religious and Secularism**

The 1995 constitution has already proclaimed that state and religion are clearly separated and no intervention of any kind should be made between religious institutions and the state. However, various stakeholders are verified that there were contemporary interventions of the state in to the affairs of the Muslim community. Several studies like (CGAF, 2016), and others for instance argues that Ethiopia is faced with difficult policy choices involved in guarding against internal radicalization through systematic (at times constitutionally questionable) interventions

<sup>1</sup>. USCIRF Chapter on the Horn of Africa

<sup>2</sup>. Many in the Muslim community consider these employees as Al-Ahbash interpretation preachers

<sup>3</sup>. No any *alim* (intellectual) can preach either individually or in group, without the permission of the EIASC permission paper or that of the committees in almost all mosques in the country.

<sup>4</sup>. USCIRF Chapter on the HoA.

that have tended to favor established religious authorities. It further warns the consequences the risk of such interventions to the state's neutrality as mediator. The alleged government intervention has been a debate among the various bodies over its certainty. Though the project has been formerly designed, it became vividly observable to the various researchers and institutions only in 2012/13. Østebø, in his latest publication on Islam and State relations in Ethiopia, investigated that "the current Ethiopian regime has moved from a policy of containing Islam to promoting its own form of "governmental Islam"" dictating that the government has clearly intervened in the issue under discussion. He further states that Crucial in this regard is the cooperation between the regime and the Lebanese organization al-Ahbash and the ways the current regime in cooperation with this organization has embarked on a strategy of combating what it sees as "extremist Islam." Various interviewed imams witnessed that they were forced to attend the conference by government bodies. At first, the government in the various meetings and through its media insisted that the issue of intervention is un true and even no any sect has been invited. Late on, the government the invitation of the Ahbash sect from abroad, but claim that it is not the government that made the invitation, rather tried to relate it with the Mejlis. The point worth of consideration here is that the government accused, killed and sentenced quite a large number of the Muslim community who react such intervention up to 22years of imprisonment. The project of inculcating the new sect through the Mejlis since its inception in 2012/13, has been taking place in every part of the country in firing the former imams and replacing by the new "governmental" ones. The peace loving Ethiopian Muslims, at first, have tried to select some prominent leaders, *ulemas* among the community for dealing the issue with the government body peacefully. The response of the government came, however, in terms of accusing in the name of terrorism and radicalizing the community. The intervention and the subsequent controversy is increasingly instigating a conflict between the Muslim community and the state, which in effect is bringing about further consequences on the lives of individuals, family, and the country at large in terms of curving efforts towards national integration.

Concerning the peaceful demonstrations and the government's response to these demonstrations, the participant observation result is compiled as follows.

*In response to the required trainings and the closing of the Aweliya Islamic School, Muslims in Addis Ababa and several other Ethiopian cities held peaceful protests in mosques after Friday prayers since 2011. As the mottos of the demonstrators reflected, they are calling on the government to respect constitutional protections for separation of religion and state and end its interference in their community's internal religious affairs. The responses were not good in many respects. Generally, Protestors were beaten, arrested and harassed with some witnesses on police use of teargas and live ammunition against protestors.*

## **8 Current Trends in Relation to Islam and Security**

The ruling party's increasing reactions and restrictions deprived Muslims of much of the freedoms they had acquired since 1991 (Haustein and Østebø, 2011), and with the closure of Islamic organizations, it left the EIASC to emerge as the sole actor claiming to represent the Muslim population as a whole. Assisted by the ministry of federal and pastoral affairs (MFPA), the emerging nature of the council's as a vast apparatus and its close links with the government have effectively enabled the latter to monitor and control the various longstanding complains within the Muslim community. Moreover, despite the increased voices and criticisms from the various human right organizations, political parties, intellectuals and others over its ambiguous nature, the country's recently drafted anti terrorism law<sup>1</sup>, is being practiced to combat extremism and the subsequent terrorism. Due to the geographical proximity of the country to Somalia, where the theatre of Al-shabab and other groups is displayed, there might be an increasing tension and anxiety over terrorist attacks. However, there is no plausible justification that Islam and Muslims in Ethiopia pose security threats to the country (Fentaw, 2012). Terrorist attacks, as we are seeing everywhere in the world today, are justified by frequent ruthless attacks on civilians, which implies the blind nature of terror of any kind. The Ethiopian experience, a country with a huge number of Muslim populations comparable to that of Sudan, shows no registered terrorist attack in its long history. This shows that there is no security threat in the name of Islam in Ethiopia. In fact, terrorism come in to the scene in the contemporary era at the global level, owing the rest of the long human history dominated by worst records due to slave trade, colonialism, genocide, and more recently world war I and II. However, the effects of globalization, best characterized in swallowing the identities, cultures and civilizations of others, preferably minorities and propagation of the cultural values of the dominant groups, resulted in the consolidation of terror and terrorist groups in our world. From its very nature, Islam, is peaceful, and extremely encourages rational thinking and harmony among all human races. While terrorism put its apogee only at these days, the entire history of Islam, since its inception, is fairly characterized by the advancement of civilizations in science and arts. Once up on a time, preferably from the 4<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century, while Europe was suffering from the effects of the period known as Dark Age, the light of Islam was bright in

<sup>1</sup>. "Whosoever writes, edits, prints, publishes, publicizes, disseminates, shows, makes to be heard any promotional statements encouraging... terrorist acts is punishable with rigorous imprisonment from 10 to 20 years."



Arabian Peninsula. Thus, it is clear these days that leaders of the west tied Islam with terrorism. But, it is clear that they are the ones who instigated terror through their frequent and excessive interventions in the domestic issues of sovereign Arab states (Yimer, 2015). These includes the assassination of Saddam Hussein of Iraq and the subsequent emergence of factions thereof, un constitutional removal of leaders through financing oppositionary groups in Libya, Egypt, Syria, the cession of south Sudan and the repercussions thereof, and very recently un successful coup attempt in Turkey. All these issues led to the proliferation of several factions and refugee crisis, which in effect brought about insecurity in many respects. Therefore, while there is no domestic security threat in the country, the policy diversions of the nation might be tied to the fact that it has been preferably considered as an important regional security partner to US<sup>1</sup>.

## 9. The way forward

It is widely discussed that not only the nature of Islam and Muslims in Ethiopia is absolutely peaceful but also interreligious relationships could be characterized as highly harmonious in the long history of the country. Muslims in contemporary Ethiopia still face difficult constraints. Large and frequent Muslim protests were usually peaceful and generally met with a restrained response by security forces, although there were instances of violence. Despite the frequent and excessive violations and marginalization they suffered from the successive Abyssinian rulers, Islam and Muslims existed and continue to coexist peacefully. The current action of the Ethiopian government against the Muslim community is a kind of conflict instigation and aggression which possibly could lead to total national and regional destabilization. Since 2011, the Ethiopian government moved against the country's Muslim society unprecedented in its nearly 30 year's history. The recent confrontation between the state and the Muslim community commenced since 2011 has put a repercussion on three interrelated issues. The growing interference of the government in religious affairs, the violation of the ever secular constitution thereof and the deterioration of the state and the Muslim community relations, which will have a great implication on the longstanding agenda of the state to create one political and economic community. Various scholars are forwarding their views on the potential consequences of the move by the Ethiopian government to violate the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of religion would push the country into a catastrophic disaster.

## 10. Recommendations

As we know, key entry points for development are peace (internal and external) and security. Therefore, maintaining and fostering peace and internal stability are worth considerations in the quest for national integration. There must be cordial state society relationships. Actors should act in the right direction that might result in win-win situations. How can we just return to the past golden days when we saw unique and amazing state society relationships? One pathway, could be adopting right based approach, in which policy makers consider the protection of human rights while making decisions. The other could be establishing transparent and accountable institutions such as the Mejlis, which are not less concerned about the purpose for which they are established. The working of the council (Mejlis) should be free, fair and transparent including in its electoral process, the point in which the recent controversy emerged. Here, although, the regulation and monitoring process for the purposes of concerns with regard to terrorism might not be ignored, excessive intervention through the council is highly disastrous. Equally important point here is the issue of peace building in post conflict arenas. This might include, stopping the increasing interference, using balanced force in times of conflict, freeing those who are in jail, official apology and indemnity for those who lost their families in the conflict, managing state media (the discourse of terrorism and some sort of dispute should be carefully presented to the public), amending the country's law on terrorism, allow civil society organizations to take the responsibility to settle conflicts ahead of their escalation and others.

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<sup>1</sup> . U.S. Department of State, Bureau of African Affairs, "Background Note: Ethiopia."

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