

# Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

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## Responses to Information Requests

Responses to Information Requests (RIR) respond to focused Requests for Information that are submitted to the Research Directorate in the course of the refugee protection determination process. The database contains a seven-year archive of English and French RIRs. Earlier RIRs may be found on the UNHCR's [Refworld](#) website. Please note that some RIRs have attachments which are not electronically accessible. To obtain a PDF copy of an RIR attachment, please email the [Knowledge and Information Management Unit](#).

5 August 2014

**ETH104926.E**

Ethiopia: Treatment of members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) by authorities (2011-July 2014)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

**1. Background****1.1 Statistics**

Sources report that approximately 44 percent of Ethiopia's population adheres to Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity (*PHW* 2013; Ethiopia Dec. 2008, 17; US 20 May 2013, 1), which is predominant in the Tigray and Amhara regions, but also present in Oromia (*ibid.*). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, Terje Østebø, an assistant professor at the University of Florida whose research focuses on inter-religious relations in Africa and Ethiopia [1], indicated that EOTC practitioners are mainly of Amhara and Tigray ethnicity, with some Oromo (Østebø 17 July 2014). Muslims make up approximately 34 percent of the population while Pentecostal and other Christian groups make up approximately 19 percent (US 20 May 2013, 1; Ethiopia Dec. 2008, 17).

**1.2 Historical Background**

Østebø explains that under Haile Selassie [the emperor who was in power until 1974 (*PHW* 2013, 460)], the EOTC was the state church (Østebø 17 July 2014). In a book titled *Eastern Christianity and the Cold War, 1945-91*, Steven Kaplan, a professor of comparative religion at Hebrew University in Jerusalem [2] writes about the EOTC, and indicates that from 1941-1974 the EOTC "remained a loyal partner of the Emperor" and that the Revised Constitution of 1955 designated the EOTC as the 'established church supported by the State' (Kaplan 2010, 302). Minority Rights Group International (MRG) indicates that "historically, the Semitic, Amhara and Tigray peoples of the northern highlands have dominated political life"; they are reportedly "largely Orthodox Christians" (MRG n.d.). Freedom House writes that at that time, "the Amhara ethnic group, with the strong support of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, was politically dominant" (2007). In 1974, Haile Selassie was deposed by the military (*PHW* 2013, 460). The Armed Forces Coordinating Committee (known as DERG or Dergue), a Marxist party, took power (*ibid.*; L'aménagement linguistique 24 June 2009). Østebø explains that during the DERG "regime," the EOTC lost its status as state church, its properties, and position as the "political elite" (17 July 2014). Similarly, Kaplan writes that the church lands and properties were nationalized and the church was no longer able to tax peasants living on church property; he indicates that under the "new regime," "participation in Church life was to be strongly discouraged" (2010 300, 303).

In 1991, the Ethiopian People's Democratic Front (EPRDF), a coalition established by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) rebel group, ousted the DERG "regime" and took power (*PHW* 2013, 461). The EPRDF is reportedly "dominated by northern highlanders and Orthodox Christians" (*ibid.*, 465). Corroborating

information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

## 2. Legislation on Religious Freedom

The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) *Annual Report 2014* and the US Department of State's 2013 *Report on International Religious Freedom* both indicate that the Ethiopian Constitution [adopted in 1994 (Ethiopia 1995)] protects freedom of religion and provides for a separation of religion and the state (US 20 May 2013, 2; US 30 Apr. 2014, 157), and, according to USCIRF, the country has a "long history of religious tolerance and inter-religious cooperation" (ibid.). The *International Religious Freedom Report for 2012* states that the formation of political parties based on religion is illegal (US 20 May 2013, 2). According to the same source, the EOTC, Muslim community, and Ethiopian Jewish Falashas, due to their "historical dominance," are not required to register as religious groups; however, all others must register with the Ministry of Justice to obtain "legal standing" (ibid.). However, Haustein and Østebø wrote in the *Journal of Eastern African Studies* that the EOTC "is still exempt from registration by the Civil Code of 1960, whereas for all others registration is a legal mandate (Haustein and Ostebo Nov. 2011, 757).

## 3. EOTC Schism

The EOTC split in 1991 when the EOTC Patriarch Abune Merkorios was replaced by Abune Paulos (Kaplan 2010, 309; *The Daily Telegraph* 31 Aug. 2012). Patriarch Abune Merkorios and his supporters left the country and established a rival EOTC Synod in the US [also known as the EOTC Holy-Synod-in-Exile-in-North-America] (ibid.). Abune Paulos remained the EOTC Patriarch in Ethiopia until his death in 2012; he was replaced by Patriarch Matthias (Østebø 17 July 2014).

*The Daily Telegraph* indicates that Merkorios was "ousted by a Church synod convened by the new government" formed in 1991 (31 Aug. 2012). Similarly, the exiled Synod claims that Merkorios was "forced out of his position under the orders of the regime's security forces" (EOTC Synod in Exile 23 Feb. 2013). According to Østebø, Paulos there are claims he was brought in by the TPLF (17 July 2014). In contrast, sources report that others claim Merkorios resigned (Kaplan 28 July 2014; Haustein and Ostebo Nov. 2011, 760).

While, according to the USCIRF, Ethiopian Orthodox Christians complain of "government interference" in the leadership of the EOTC (30 Apr. 2013, 2), Haustein and Østebø write that, in their view,

other than the appointment of a new [leader], there are no clear indications of direct government intervention, whereas it is clear that members of the church's hierarchy interested in reversing the previous political alignment effectively drove this process and used or welcomed government involvement in order to attain their goals.

This conflation of church and EPRDF politics and the central public role of Ethiopian Orthodoxy contributed to the politicization of the [Ethiopian Orthodox Church]. (Haustein and Ostebo Nov. 2011, 760-761)

Meanwhile, the *Daily Telegraph* reports that "[e]xperts" attributed the EOTC schism to ethnic divisions in the country (31 Aug. 2012). Paulos was from the Tigray ethnic group (*Daily Telegraph* 31 Aug. 2012; *Al-Ahram Weekly* 5 Sept. 2012), while Merkorios is an ethnic Amhara (ibid.). In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, Steven Kaplan similarly said that the division among Ethiopian Orthodox Christians was caused by ethnic issues (Kaplan 28 July 2014). He further explained that the schism caused churches in the diaspora to split, where some are in communion with the Synod in Ethiopia, some are loyal to the Synod in exile, and some churches are trying to remain neutral (ibid.).

## 4. Treatment of EOTC Members and Clergy

Information about the treatment of EOTC members and clergy by authorities was scarce amongst the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Østebø said that the EOTC is an institution "intrinsic" to Ethiopian identity, and that the government has "essentially" been "accommodating" to the EOTC (17 July 2014). According to the USCIRF, the government stated that "they do not violate religious freedom or intervene in religious affairs unless 'red lines' are crossed"; the USCIRF report notes that such red lines "were not defined" (US 30 Apr. 2013, 1). Østebø similarly explained that, in his view, the TPLF/EPRDF is not interested in the substance or content of religious practices, and that religious groups are free to practice their faith, if they do not have a "political agenda" (17 July 2014). Østebø expressed the opinion that "outward harassment" toward church members by state authorities because of their religious views would be "unlikely"; however, church members or clergy who are politically active or challenge the government could be arrested; he noted that EOTC has not been "politically vocal against the government" (ibid.). Similarly, a professor of social studies at the Free University of

Amsterdam whose research focuses on ethnicity and culture in the Horn of Africa, indicated that the TPLF/EPRDF government must constitutionally respect religious communities, but that there is political scrutiny of all religions (Professor at the Free University 22 July 2014). He expressed the opinion that there is "no active persecution" of EOTC Christians, but that there is "suppression of EOTC 'political' awareness and expression" (ibid.). He said that priests who speak out can be arrested (ibid.).

In February 2013, the EOTC Synod in Exile in North America issued a statement, published on Ethiomedia [3], regarding the divisions within the church, in which they state that

those who stand for the peace and unity of our Church, including our religious Fathers, the clergy, organized Orthodox groups, and the faithful at large in Ethiopia, are being subjected to threats, intimidation, and warnings often coming from government operatives that oppose the return of the legal Patriarch to Ethiopia. (EOTC Synod in Exile 23 Feb. 2013)

Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to Østebø, the dynamic across the country is that local administrators are more likely to accommodate their own religious group, and groups that try building religious sites in areas where they are the minority have difficulty obtaining permission (17 July 2014). However, he said that Orthodox Christians have not been the main target, as much as Protestant and Muslim groups (ibid.). Sources report on the following incidents of conflict:

- In 2011, the Saint Arsema Orthodox Church in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region (SNNPR) was burned down, allegedly by a group of 500 Muslim students accompanied by "Muslim police," reportedly after local authorities determined the church was built without proper authorization and had to be demolished (ICC 8 Dec. 2011).
- Without providing details, *Finote Netsanet* [the publication of Unity for Democracy and Justice, the main opposition party (AI USA 23 May 2013)] reported that in January 2012, St. Rafael Ethiopian Orthodox church in Zara town of the SNNPR was burned down during clashes (*Finote Netsanet* 7 Feb. [2012]).

Corroborating information for these incidents could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

## 5. Sugar Plantation Conflict

Sources report that the Ethiopian government planned to build sugar factories or plantations on lands near the Waldiba [or Waldeba] monastery (Ethiopian News Agency 23 Mar. 2012; ESAT 10 June 2012). According to Ethiopian Satellite Television (ESAT) [4], Ethiopian Orthodox Christians opposed the project, which they perceived as "an issue of freedom of religion," and residents of the area claimed the project "encroaches on the historical Monastery's estate" (ibid.). In 2012, five monks from the Ethiopian Orthodox Waldiba monastery were "incarcerated" and were "coerced to take responsibility for the slew of heavy construction equipment destroyed at the site of the controversial [s]ugar plantation" (ibid. 6 July 2012). ESAT also reported that 15 farmers were killed over a conflict with police near the site, and that 60 people were jailed following a road block in a town near the monastery (ibid. 10 June 2012). The Synod in Exile in North America released a statement in which they claim that "[d]ozens of monks and celibates are being persecuted for resisting the government's desecration of the holiest of holy sites in that country" (EOTC Synod in Exile 23 Feb. 2013). However, according to a statement by the state-owned Ethiopian News Agency, the government claims that the project has had "no negative impact on the monastery" (Ethiopian News Agency 23 Mar. 2012).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

### Notes

[1] Terje Østebø is also a senior researcher at the International Law and Policy Institute in Oslo, Norway (Østebø 17 July 2014).

[2] Steven Kaplan has authored academic articles, book chapters, and taught courses on Ethiopian Christianity.

[3] Ethiomedia is a Seattle-based website that describes itself as a "forum for exchange of views among Ethiopians" and that "oppose[s] the current regime's political philosophy and economic policies" (Ethiomedia n.d.).

[4] ESAT is an Amsterdam-based non-profit news organization powered by a "broad-based collective of exiled journalists, human rights advocates, civic society leaders and members" of the diaspora (ESAT n.d.).

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## Additional Sources Consulted

**Oral sources:** Attempts to contact the following individuals and organizations were unsuccessful within the time constraints of this Response: Christian Aid Ethiopia; Christian Relief and Development Association Ethiopia; Ethiopia Human Rights Council; Ethiopian Christian Lawyers Fellowship; Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church in Addis Ababa; six Ethiopian Orthodox churches in North America; Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association; Senior Researcher, CHR Michelsen Institute.

The following individuals could not provide information for this Response: Senior Partner, International Law and Policy Institute; Emeritus Professor of social anthropology, Oxford University; Research Associate, Department of Development Studies, University of London.

**Internet sites, including:** Addis Voice; African Studies Leiden; Afrik News; Agence de presse africaine; Al Jazeera; All Africa; Amharic News Portal; Amnesty International; *Awramba Times*; *Christian Science Monitor*; Deutschewelle; East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project; ECADForum; ecoi.net; Ethiopia – Central Statistical Agency of Ethiopia, Government Portal, Human Rights Commission, Institution of the Ombudsman; Ethiopian-News.com; Ethiopian Observer; EOTC-Patriarch.org; Fédération internationale des ligues des droits de l'homme; *The Guardian*; Human Rights Council Ethiopia; Human Rights Watch; International Crisis Group; Institute for War and Peace Reporting; *Jeune Afrique*; Minority Rights Group International; Nazret.com; *The New York Times*; Panapress; The Reporter Ethiopia; Reuters; *Sudan Tribune*; Tigray.net; United Kingdom – Home Office; United Nations – Integrated Regional Information Networks, Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights, Refworld; Voice of America; Walta.info; World Council of Churches.

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