

Ethiopian Muslims and Their Struggle for Rights

By Elyas Mulu Kiros, 19 July 2012

Muslims have always enjoyed religious freedom like other believers - until recently. Now they are fighting to reclaim their rights.

Islam has a long history in Ethiopia, after Christianity. Ethiopia was the first country that sheltered the first Muslims who called it home, escaping persecution from Arabia, their homeland. Their leader, the Prophet Muhammad, advised them to leave Mecca, and escape to Ethiopia, then Axum kingdom.

The Christian king, who welcomed them despite local opposition, granted the visitors refugee status and permitted them to practice their religion peacefully without forcing anyone to convert. The Islamic version of this history concludes that the king himself became a convert eventually, but the facts surrounding that claim remain debatable. However, the mosque that was built back then is still in existence in northern Ethiopia, in Tigray region; perhaps reconstructed, but kept in good condition.

The event above, which took place in 615 C.E., is the first Hijira, or Muslim migration. Nevertheless, the Prophet's migration from Mecca to Medina in 622 C.E. is considered as the official first Hijira in the Islamic calendar. Since that event Islam has had a solid presence in Ethiopia. For the most part, both Muslim and Christian Ethiopians have enjoyed a peaceful coexistence, though there have been clashes due to the invisible hands of foreign powers such as the Ottomans that wanted to invade Ethiopia by proxy, encouraging lowlanders, predominantly Muslims, to fight against highlanders, largely Orthodox Christians and the decision makers in state affairs until 1974 when religion and state were formally divorced.

Though it was not perfect, Muslims did enjoy significant religious rights as citizens during the imperial government of Emperor Haile Selassie. They were free to do almost anything like every subject of the King as long as they backed off from questioning political power. And most were actively involved in business; thus, rarely posing a threat to the ruling class.

During the military dictatorship, Muslims enjoyed more or less the same religious rights as their Christian brothers and sisters. Like everybody else, they were also victims of the dictatorship.

Until very recently, Muslims had a positive relationship with the current administration. To be fair, the current system did open up a lot of space for religious freedom. The primary criticism directed at the system has never been religious disenfranchisement, but ethnic and economic; including the erosion of individual freedom. The religious freedom enshrined in the current constitution has allowed all kinds of religions to mushroom in Ethiopia. And religious groups such as the Muslims who felt marginalized in the past have welcomed this.

So what happened lately? Why is the government in conflict with the Muslim population? Why do Muslims, as a religious group, now vehemently oppose the government?

Well, the simplified answer is this: It took away their religious rights. And they are fighting it to claim their rights back. Impressively, they have been the most consistent in their non-violent struggle against the government, even as they face violence.

With freedom, both good and bad choices, depending on who judges, are available. What that means is that religious freedom, for example, can open the door for religious fundamentalism, or new religious sects can be introduced. In Ethiopia's case, since the ratification of the new constitution, there has been a great number of religious sects, both Islamic and Christian, that entered Ethiopia from outside. And one of them is Wahhabism, a fundamentalist sect of Islam, mainly practiced in Saudi Arabia.

Following Wahhabism's introduction, a lot has changed significantly, especially in the rural part of Ethiopia, where this sect was spread fast, through religious missionaries who were directly funded by Saudi Arabia. Followers of Wahhabism strictly oppose the mainstream Muslims; even they consider them as less pure. Their goal is to radicalize the moderate Muslims and advocate less contact with Christians, or what they consider Infidels. How do I know this? I was in the middle of it. I grew up in a small town where Muslims were divided into Wahhabis and non-Wahhabis, both going to separate mosques.

How does the government fit into this picture? And what is the source of the present conflict? There are so many rumors, politically motivated commentaries, and theories out there regarding this issue. It is a tricky subject. For groups who oppose the government: If there is any problem among Muslims, it must be purposely created by the government to divide and rule society; the government is using the Wahhabism issue as an excuse to silence dissent. Well, there may be some truth in that argument, but it is not entirely true, at least based on my personal experience.

The government surely continues to tackle the rise of Wahhabism into the mainstream. What caused trouble is the way it handled the matter. According to its critics, it went beyond its power to interfere in the national and local Islamic affairs: Installing unelected leaders that it favors and introducing an Islamic school of teaching from outside, not approved by the faithful. These are two of the many reasons that have forced Ethiopian Muslims to go out in the streets protesting. Their only demand is for the government to respect their rights, leave them alone, and self-determine their fate. And deal with the extremists in a sensible manner. They also strongly resist the government's categorization of those that genuinely criticize it as extremists or terrorists.

What could have been solved peacefully, unfortunately, thanks to the arrogance of those in leadership, it has now the problem escalated to a point of no return. Federal police have beaten and killed protestors in the last few days. And more people are joining the protest.

Add the volatile national politics into this mix. No surprise, the government is on fire.

However, I have huge respect for Ethiopian Muslims. So far, they have been struggling for their rights peacefully as you can see it in this video. This is a sign that indeed there is hope for non-violent struggle in Ethiopia. It is up to the government now to end this conflict gracefully. Otherwise, escalating the conflict will only cost it.