



General Assembly

Distr.: General
22 February 2024

English only

Human Rights Council

Fifty-fifth session

26 February–5 April 2024

Agenda item 3

**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights Association, a non- governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[3 February 2024]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



Violations of the Right to Freedom of Religion and Beliefs in Ethiopia

Introduction:

The situation in Ethiopia reveals numerous violations of the right to freedom of religion and belief. Conflicts of a religious nature underscore the failure of the Ethiopian government to uphold the constitutional system that governs this right. The policies and development plans of Ethiopia also demonstrate a lack of respect for the religious and cultural values of its people. In light of these issues, Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights Association has been monitoring violations of the right to freedom of religion and belief in Ethiopia. In its written intervention submitted to the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion and belief, Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights Association highlights the facts surrounding freedom of religion and belief in Ethiopia, assesses the government's interventions in religious affairs and its human rights obligations, examines the impact of development plans on this right, and provides recommendations.

First: Violations of Legal and Constitutional Framework for Right to Freedom of Religion and Belief:

Although the Ethiopian Constitution guarantees freedom of religion in Article 27(1), stating that "Every individual has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. This right includes the freedom to adopt or convert to any religion or belief of their choice," the reality on the ground paints a different picture. Muslims, who make up approximately 33% of Ethiopia's population, as well as those displaced across different regions of Ethiopia, face various forms of persecution. Ethiopia's regulation of freedom of religion and belief is limited to the confines of the constitutional system.

In practice, Ethiopia's actions do not align with its international, regional, and national human rights obligations concerning freedom of religion and belief. A closer examination of the Ethiopian constitutional system and its articles reveals the secular nature of the state, which emphasizes the separation of religion and state while safeguarding freedom of religion and belief, allowing individuals the freedom to choose and practice their religion. The constitution prohibits religious discrimination, and interference in religious practices, and permits Sharia courts to handle personal status cases, provided that both parties are Muslim and willingly submit to the court's jurisdiction. However, the realities in Ethiopia demonstrate numerous violations and practices that infringe upon freedom of belief and thought. Constitutionally, the articles prohibit holding religious services within public institutions, prayer in schools, and religious education in public and private schools. They only allow for establishing separate religious schools under the auspices of churches and mosques(1).

Second: Government Interference in Religious Affairs:

The Ethiopian government continues to interfere in the organization and structure of religious affairs, leading to religious conflicts and disruptions of religious demonstrations and events. Statistics from 2021, 2022, and 2023 indicate that there were more than 18, 25, and 13 violent incidents, respectively, related to religious conflicts(2). Furthermore, the government's violations and practices extend to impeding the right of civilians to peacefully assemble with regards to freedom of religion and belief. On May 31, 2023, Ethiopian security forces clashed with mass demonstrations protesting the destruction of mosques near the "Anwar Shamal Mosque" in the Ethiopian capital. During this incident, police forces arrested 114 individuals, which sparked outrage among Islamic religious institutions. The excessive number of judicial prosecutions against Muslims defending their rights was strongly condemned. This incident coincided with the targeting and burning of the town of Mota(3).

Additionally, the Ethiopian government's infrastructure and mechanisms to combat religious hate speech remain weak and insufficient in addressing the consequences of such speech.

By the end of 2023, the Ethiopian Media Authority reported a significant rise in religious hate speech and misinformation propagated through social media platforms. Activists, political groups, religious leaders, and journalists have been actively involved in delivering speeches and statements that contribute to this issue(4).

Third: Violations of Ethiopian Government Plans and Policies:

Since 2018, Ethiopia has pursued development policies that disregard environmental concerns, the rights of minorities and indigenous peoples, as well as the right to freedom of religion and belief. The urban development policies implemented in the Ethiopian capital destroyed more than 35 mosques between 2018 and June 2023. Furthermore, in 2022, Ethiopia launched a new project called "Shaghar City" in the Oromia region as part of an urban planning initiative under the authority of the Oromia region. This project, operational since 2022, poses a threat to cultural and religious structures. It involves integrating six towns surrounding the capital into a large western arc, which will result in the demolition of at least 400,000 homes and over 300 "illegally" constructed mosques, despite the ease of legalizing other religious institutions like churches. To implement this project, the government began demolishing homes, mosques, and churches without proper title deeds, to free up space for investment and transform the area into government-owned property. Statistics from the second half of 2023 revealed that the Ethiopian government demolished more than 22 Islamic mosques and caused the displacement of over 100,000 people after demolishing their homes. Additionally, police forces arrested 111 individuals(5).

Furthermore, religious leaders have faced persecution throughout 2023. Incidents of persecution and harassment of Islamic leaders occurred throughout the year. On February 10, 2023, seven Muslim sheiks were arrested after refusing to surrender the largest mosque in the city. These practices have fueled anger and unrest within the Islamic community, as they protest against the oppression and persecution of their religious leaders.

Fourth: Recommendations:

After conducting thorough monitoring, analysis, and extrapolation of the facts concerning the right to freedom of religion and belief, as well as reviewing the practices and violations of the Ethiopian government in relation to its incorrect development policies and interventions in religious affairs, Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights Association presents a set of recommendations that aim to uphold Ethiopia's obligations towards this right. The recommendations are as follows:

1. Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights Association recommends that the Ethiopian government intensify its efforts to combat religious hate speech. It should launch educational and awareness programs to promote respect for religions and foster a culture of diversity. Maat also urges the government to facilitate the involvement of civil society organizations and universities in combatting religious hate speech, promoting social peace, and providing training in dialogue.
2. Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights Association calls on the Ethiopian government to review and amend its legal and legislative framework governing the right to freedom of religion and belief. This should involve addressing any legal gaps and expanding the scope of human rights obligations concerning freedom of religion and belief. The government should enhance guarantees and obligations related to religious education, as well as simplify procedures for establishing and organizing religious institutions, events, and matters.
3. Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights Association urges the Ethiopian government to reassess its development policies, particularly those concerning the expansion of the capital since 2018 and the Shaghar City project. It is essential to evaluate their impact and address any human rights violations, particularly those affecting the religious and cultural sanctities of the population and resident communities.

4. Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights Association emphasizes the need for the Ethiopian government to reform its human rights system and create an appropriate legal environment for the right to freedom of religion and belief. This entails respecting the rights of indigenous peoples and religious minorities, recognizing their cultures and rituals as integral to Ethiopia's identity, and reforming the relevant framework for freedom of opinion, expression, and peaceful assembly.

(1) REF World, Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, access date January 2024, <https://shorter.me/9sR4S>

(2) Haq check, Do the pictures show recently demolished mosques in Oromia? 23 May 2023, <https://shorter.me/laws>

(3) Al Arabia news, Worshipers, police clash after Friday prayers in Ethiopia, 2 June 2023, https://shorter.me/Q_fNH

(4) ENA, Hate Speech, Misinformation on Social Media Forums "Very Concerning", Says Ethiopian Media Authority, Access date 24 January 2024, https://www.ena.et/web/eng/w/eng_2951725

(5) politics today, Demolishing Mosques in Ethiopia: Urbanization or Islamophobia? 21 June 2023, <https://shorter.me/1ZiAr>