

# The Politics of Secularism in Ethiopia: Repression and/or Co-option towards EOTC<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *Secularism in Ethiopia has not been practiced as stipulated in the 1995 Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) constitution, separation of state and religion. Instead consecutive regimes since the introduction of secularism employed a tactic of co-option and repression towards the Ethiopia Orthodox Tewahido Church (EOTC) to meet their political objectives. This paper thus tried to address the nature and manifestation of government intervention in the EOTC through either co-option and/or repression with a special emphasis on the post 2018 regime. The study argues de-facto secularism in Ethiopia is far from the essence of separation of state and religion; it is a new version of religion industriously implemented by governments to upgrade the Orthodox Church in a way that fits with the political system. The secular regimes co-opted and repressed the church conditionally at any cost of the institution through Machiavellian approach. The study also finds that the Prosperity led regime was actively involved in the internal affairs of the church; in early days through co-option in the name of reconciliation with the exile synod. And in the later days via repression; massive killing of orthodox followers, burning of churches and restriction on church's annual ceremony the like epiphany are the manifestations.*

**Keywords:** secularism, religion, co-option, repression, EOTC

## 1. Introduction

Ethiopia, almost half a century has practiced a de jure secular political system. Following the disposal of the age-old monarchical system in 1974, secularism became one of the guiding political principles of the republic. As it was common anywhere in the then Christian states, the state and the church in Ethiopia were tightly intertwined, with one buttressing the other in both spiritual and civil administrations for millennia. The ancient monarchs claimed divine justification for their wars and empires, and demonstrated religious devotion as a key ingredient of legitimacy to the State (Jorgen, 2009). The blurred or theocratic nature of interaction between the state and religion in pre 1974 Ethiopia is not an exception thereof.

Among the immediate reactions of the Military Regime (1974-91), the adoption of secularism; constitutionally introducing a separation between the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the state, was worth mentioning. The Derg regime that adopted socialism as its peculiar ideology had of course an anti-religious approach which considerably affected all religions. The regime particularly reacted to EOTC oddly; politically the regime persecuted the highest officials, (including the murder of his holiness Patriarch Theophilos) of the church, nationalized its properties, and condemned the church as old age wished to be collapsed (Tsegaye, 2020). Notwithstanding the adoption of secularism and hostile reaction to the church, religion continued as a solid political apparatus of the socialist Ethiopia and the regime engaged in manipulation of the institution for political ends.

The coalition of identity based liberation movements overthrew the 17 years old regime, full of civil war and uncertainty, in 1991. The coalition of the liberation fronts called Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (here after EPRDF) confirmed de-jure secular political landscape in the 1995 Federal Democratic Republic (FDRE) constitution. Article 11 of the FDRE constitution clearly stipulates "the separation of state and religion", secularism otherwise. Additional provisions on religious equality and freedom are also incalculated. Although the constitution prohibits state intervention in religious affairs and vice-versa, the regime tightly regulates every activity of religious institutions, in this case the EOTC. The two regimes did subscribe not only to the Habermasian secularist idea of the public area of rational thought but also religions were considered as irrelevant and unfitted with their communist ideology (Ostebo, 2023). This is a shocking progress to societies like Ethiopia with strong obedience to religious dogmas. With an intention to secure their political power, the EPRDF made an unreserved effort to regulate and subordinate different religious institutions (Haustein and Østebø, 2011), which is in a clear contradiction to the provision stated in article 11 of the FDRE constitution. The regime clearly showed a strong involvement in the appointment of the patriarch. Most evident is the replacement of the patriarch in 1991 (ibid), which was driven by a conflation of government and church politics.

The post 2018 political transition under the leadership of Abiy Ahmed, gives room to religious discourses in Ethiopia politics. Unlike the previous regime, the premier uses religious languages of hope, loyalty and love to induce his vision of new Ethiopia (Haustein and Dereje, 2022). He was also actively involved in religious affairs of the orthodox, the Muslims and evangelicals; also played roles

<sup>1</sup> EOTC was coined after the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahido* Church; the oldest and historic religious institutions in the world and one of the six Oriental Orthodox Churches, and the largest among this group.

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in the reconciliation process between the principal synod and the dissident one. In contrast, the Prosperity Party (PP)-led government condemned for it supporting schism in EOTC, mass killing of Christians, demolition of churches in Oromia Regional State and other parts of Ethiopia. Notwithstanding the constitutional provision to protect religious institutions from the coercive powers of the state, the Abiy Ahmed regime in one or other way intervene in EOTC through repression and to some extent via co option for political ends. Thus, the very objective of this study is to scrutinize the nature and manifestation of government intervention on EOTC through cooption and/or repression in contrast to article 11 of FDRE constitution with a special coverage to post 2018 regime.

## 2. Research methods and Materials

Ethiopia, installed a de jure secular political landscape in 1974. However, in Ethiopia where religions have significant weight, practicing assertive secularism<sup>3</sup> As mentioned in the 1995 FDRE is tough business and impractical. As a result, the past three consecutive regimes (the military regime, the EPRDF and the PP) are strongly involved and interfere in varying degrees in religious institutions to achieve their political ends or garner legitimacy. This paper intends to examine the nature and extent of state intervention in EOTC. To address the issue under study, both primary and secondary sources were well consulted. As it is a live issue, consecutive press releases of EOTC on the schism and the killing of orthodox followers and burning of churches were reviewed. Press conferences made by the government, opposition political parties, Human right commissions regarding EOTC's splits and religious conflicts were also analyzed. Domestic and international media outlets too were considered. Consecutive Annual reports of International Religious Freedom (IRF) (2018-2022) are critically reviewed. Secondary sources; scholarly articles on secularism, journals studied by religious institutes and other relevant data were taken into account.

Thematically, the paper tried to scrutinize state manipulation and repression on religious institutions with a special focus on EOTC either through co-option or repression or both since the onset of secularism with a wide coverage to the post 2018 regime. The Machiavellian approach towards religion is employed to examine the nature of Abiy Ahmed's regime intervention towards the EOTC.

## 3. Glance at Secularization Thesis: Tri-dimensional Understandings

A head of analyzing the politics of secularism in the EOTC, it is sound to identify the practical interpretation of secularism in line with the issue under study. Accordingly, three conceptual underpinnings are discussed here under.

### The Wane of Religion in Society:

This thesis perceives secularism as a lifestyle that is at odds with supernatural power, God or Allah. It is an assumption whereby a society as a group committed to a just world order and moral program of individual action that would address human problems without the use of supernatural explanation (Swatos, and Christiano, 1999). Secularization in this understanding therefore implies the decline of religion; that is, religions previously accepted symbols, doctrines, and institutions lose their prestige and influence. Speaking otherwise, mystery or religious thoughts are something to be conquered by human reason, ingenuity, and the products of technology.

The wane of religion is believed to happen due to modernization, technology and increment of rational thinking. In the words of Roberts (2004:306) secularization is "the transformation of a given community with high institutional transformation and institutional freedom from religious influence and making more rational, empirical decisions by individuals and groups." It is making religion a lowest common denominator and thus establishing a political ethic independent of religious convictions altogether. Weber (1994) also claims trust to divine power has lost trust in providing secured solutions to social and economic problems and in contrast to a heavenly bank account the earthly and tangible economic actions have come to play an increasing role in measuring the worth of knowledge.

### Secularism: the New Religion:

The second contending conception of secularism is about a new religion capable of providing rational answers to psych-social and politico-economic questions of modern societies. Accordingly, secularism is a replacement of old religion; it is in itself a belief with its own discourse. Proponents of this thesis insist that religions are declining as societal transformation increases; secularism is not a simple political philosophy but it intends to replace the age-old religion by promoting rational thinking and freedom of individuals (Shafi, 2023). Thus the freedom of individuals is at the center of secularism as a new religion. It considers human beings as holy,

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<sup>3</sup> Assertive secularism is a "comprehensive doctrine" that aims to eliminate religion from the public sphere (Kuru, 2007).

and fulfilling human needs is prominent; in contrast to so-called traditional religion, homosexuality, LGBT are considered as individual freedom to be protected.

Secularism is a manifestation of the "new religion" of reason that emerged in the Enlightenment period, which at least in its early forms identified rationality with Divinity and found in the pursuit of knowledge, a spiritual quest (Swatos, and Christiano, 1999). It is a kind of belief that best fits with the current rapid modernization. The rise of a new spirituality, secularism, today suggests that the institutionalized alternatives that are the heirs of the Church of Reason. The old sacred vistas fail to answer the contemporary human psyche. Thus, the new paradigm or new sacred vista (secularism) in a way that is relatively consistent with the sociocultural conditions imposed by high-technology and multinational capitalism is championed one (ibid).

Concluding, secularism is the new denomination of religion preferred in this century and beyond. The establishment of this new religion is not eliminating religion, yet secularized religion will be the leading religion of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond (Shafi, 2023). This is due to a modern rational scientific age of enlightenment that would replace religion as the basis for understanding and running the world. Governments who wish to renew religious canon in a way that fits with their political ends, more probably employed Turner's upgrading principle. Upgrading is reforming or secularizing religion in a way that fits with the contemporary assumption of democracy (Turner, 2007). Shortly it is secularization of religions to fit with the current development.

### **Separation of State and Religion:**

The separation of state and religion is the most pronounced and conventional conception of secularism in the mouth of the so-called secular government. However, secularism, as a principle that tries to restrict the public function of religion, is not a single magic formula applicable all over the world for all religions and states. It is understood as; no government support for religion and no government interference in the religious practices of both the majority and minority religions in a state (Fox, 2006).

Concerning the very objectives of secularism- as a separation of state and religion, Mohammed Dejen (2018) noted as follow;

*Secularism was introduced to achieve the following major purposes; firstly, to protect the state from excessive religious influence that is freedom for the state; secondly, to protect religion from the coercive powers of the state that is freedom for religion, or lastly, to manage religious diversity."*

So, separation of state and religion as a concept of secularism is about no state religion and no religious state shall be accepted. In the same parlance, article 11 of the FDRE constitution clearly confirms that "religion and state are separate and there shall be no state religion; the state shall not interfere in internal religious matters and religion shall not interfere in state affairs."<sup>4</sup>

### **4. Machiavellian's Approach Towards EOTC**

Niccolo Machiavelli (1469 – 1527), an Italian Renaissance political philosopher, statesman, and secretary of the Florentine republic, had weighed religions in their extrinsic values. He views religion as a useful instrument in the hands of the prince to technically exploit it for the ends of the state and for the sake of peace and security. In his masterpiece work, the *Prince*, Machiavelli, insists that religion should be exploited for the sake of political expediency, otherwise religion and politics should be kept separate, religion always being subordinated to politics (Zorn, 2009). In the same spirit, the consecutive regimes of Ethiopia since the introduction of secularism, harness the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as an instrument and recourse for their political objectives.

### **The Military Regime (1974 -91) – Execution of the Patriarch**

The Ethiopian monarchs, for millennia, gave Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahedo* church a significant position in the politics of the state. The coming in to power of the military regime however, brought radical political transformation. The adoption of secularism was among the primary reforms taken by the military junta; officially announced the separation state from the Orthodox Church. Though the regime is atheist and secular, it employed a bi-dimensional policy of co-option and heavy-handed repression in order to spread its ideology and control rural localities (Ancel and Ficquet, 2015).

The Marxist regime under the leadership of Mengistu Haile Mariam caused both epistemic and physical damage to the EOTC. In the name of orchestrated corruption and committing acts of injustice with counter-revolutionary elements, the Derg regime deposed and later executed Abuna Tewoflos in August 1979 along with other top imperial officials (Haile, 1986), a bloody footprint in the history of the church. The new patriarch (Abuna Takla Haymanot, elected in 1976), appointee of the ad hoc committee is undoubtedly an apolitical with rigorous ascetic practice with selfless philanthropism and an ideal choice for those in power, for he is a man in but

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<sup>4</sup> The 1995 Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia constitution, article 11

not of this world (Ancel, 2011). Beside the appointment of a new patriarch at the expense of the church canon, the regime forced retirement of the so-called old-regime member bishops. The bishops appointed during the time of Haile Selassie were not seen as best leaders to manage the reform of the Church; thus out of fourteen bishops in 1978, only three could keep their position (ibid).

The expropriation of church land, the main economic base of the institution, in 1975 was also against the very institutional existence of the church. Some of the scripture of the Orthodox Church were collected and burnt by the regime's direct order perceiving the books were being used to exploit and oppress the other Ethiopian people during the past feudal regime (Solomon, 2021). The regime also ordered the press and media to repeat frequently that EOTC and its system hindered the freedom of the Ethiopian people (Doulos, 1986). However, the role of the church in the victory of Adowa and other independence wars is by no means underestimated. The regime committed unlimited and shameful damage on the church and its followers. Implicitly, the big and famous Orthodox churches (cathedrals) were made into an exhibition hall as a historical emblem for the oppressed people by the regime by September 1982 (ibid).

The new patriarchate then began consecutive training in all dioceses to order the priest and the follower to indoctrinate the compatibility between the Holy bible and the ideology of socialism (Haile, 1986). The skillful exploitation of the holy patriarch to make him an instrument of anti-orthodox movement and to scout by the carefully selected persists and other workers to induce the illusion of compatibility between Christianity and communism" was evident. Through systematic co-option the church was highly manipulated for political and ideological indoctrination in favor of the military junta. Politically, the church excommunicated against the insurgent groups and subverted the allegiances of rebel's followers and ideologically the church laid the foundation for the acceptance of the regime and to keep the status quo (ibid). And through the deployment of heavy handed repression, the military dictatorship posed indelible interference in the church services. Speaking in other ways, the government seems to have taken a two-prong approach toward the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, appropriating and attacking the church at the same time (Haustein, 2009).

In its reign, the regime industriously worked to curtail the EOC's influence by policies of religious freedom and the secularization of education, while attacking the Orthodox Church and leadership as reactionary aides to the old feudal order. The bad experience is that the church's reaction to this epistemic and physical damage was fragile as the Marxist regime structurally oppressed it and systematically co-opted the church officials.

### **The EPRDF Regime (1991-2018) – Dissident Synod Created**

Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the mastermind and founder of EPRDF, used the Orthodox Church and parish priests to win the war against the military regime and later to induce its Marxist-Leninist political ideology.

A renowned founding member of TPLF and an author Aregawi Berehe (2008:302) insists that;

*“Seminars for priests were conducted by an eloquent TPLF fighter, GebreKidān Desta, to replace the Ethiopian Church's authority by a TPLF minded church. A scout under the leadership of Sibhat Nega infiltrates the age-old monasteries in Tigray like Debre Damo by planting TPLF member cadre- monks to control the activity of the church in favor of the party. A separate secretariat of the Orthodox Church was formed in the liberated areas of Tigray and thus in practice, the Ethiopian Church was divided in two separate secretariats, one under the regime and the other under TPLF.”*

Following the collapse of the Derg regime in 1991, the TPLF-led regime deposed then patriarch Marqorewos in 1992, and forced to live in exile. However, it was not proved, until Wikileaks<sup>5</sup> revealed the direct involvement of the regime to dethrone the patriarch. “Tamerat Layne (ex-Prime minister of Ethiopia 1991-95) confessed to Donald Yamamoto, served as U.S ambassador to Ethiopia (2006-2009) that he regretted the action he took towards EOTC for he signed the order to remove and replaced the original patriarch and the split of the church (Wikileaks, 2012).

The new patriarch with the new regime, *Abuna Paulos*, was enthroned on 12 July 1992. The exile synod also insists that the election of Paulos, who is a Tigre like most high-ranking government officials, was an orchestrated coup by the EPRDF (Haustein and Østebø, 2011). Of course it was meaningful in several interpretations. His Tigrean origin was an unambiguous indication that authority had shifted to a new ruling elite, and his election was also presented as the reinstatement of the righteous succession to *Abuna Tewoflos* (Ancel and Ficquet, 2015). The cadre in the new regime wanted a church leader at the top who shared their political vision and thus father Paulos seemed to fit with the system (Walle, 2013). For the first time, the Holy Synod of the EOTC is clearly

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<sup>5</sup> An international, online organization launched in 2006 that publishes private, secret, and classified information from anonymous news sources, news leaks, and whistleblowers.

divided in two parts through the direct action of the regime; the home synod under the authority of Patriarch Paulos and the dissident synod in the United States under the authority of Marqorewos.

The TPLF-led regime exploited the Orthodox Church from cave to palace for political ends. Its interference in religious institutions was guided with an intention of divide and rule strategy of the colonial era (Østebø, 2023). The ruling cadres have been carefully monitoring religious spaces and in multiple times interfere in the internal religious matters (Haustein and Østebø 2011) in contradiction to article 11 of their constitution. The political landscape of the regime posed diverse challenges to the Church: the separation of the Eritrean Church, the schism of the diaspora community, and the competition with other Christian denominations in a newly open religious “market” (Ancel and Ficquet, 2015) are worth mentioned.

## 5. Co-option and Repression Towards EOTC: Under Abiy Ahmed Premiership

Schism within the EPRDF coupled with popular pressure had resulted in two significant political events in 2018; the resignation of ex-prime minister Haile Mariyam Desalegn followed by the elimination of TPLF from the political power center. The dominant party, EPRDF, was demolished and the new one Prosperity under the premiership of Abiy Ahmed installed.

The Prosperity led regime practically has employed both tactics of co-option and repression towards EOTC to secure its political power. Co-optation is using religion to support the already installed system while repression is an act of subduing, intimidating and outlawing religious associations, groups or figures that are considered to be a threat to state power (Serawit, 2018).

### Abiy Ahmed’s Co-option in the Shoe of Machiavelli

The prime minister, since the day of his appointment, pronounced semi-religious vocabulary in his public addresses. He was also actively involved in the internal religious affairs; take part in the reconciliation of the EOTC with the exile synod and also in the reconfiguring of the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme council. He has thus tried to co-opt religious institutions through including religious thought in public speeches that is why he wraps up his public addresses with the phrase “God bless Ethiopia and its entire people”.

In his early days, the prime minister played a prominent role in the reconciliation of the exile synod with the principal one; and in his effort the church praised him in advance. Besides, he frequently underscores the importance of the Orthodox Church for Ethiopia. In his speech at the reconciliation conference of the church, he noted that “We cannot think of Ethiopia without the Orthodox Church, the Orthodox Church is in itself a country<sup>6</sup>.” Similarly in the forum of Prosperity Party he affirmed that “orthodox is a country, a heritage and shall be protected<sup>7</sup>.”

Abiy’s active presence in the EOTC and in other religious institutions in general, however, is claimed as an instrumentalist co-option to utilize the church for his political ends in the spirit of Niccolo Machiavelli. An Italian political philosopher, Machiavelli insists that religion shall not be ignored; the church and religion serve as an instrument for creating national customs and habits for creating national thought to preserve peace and order (Mansfield, 1985). Thus he magnifies the extrinsic values of religion for political ends. In the same parlance, Abiy Ahmed (2021) in his book entitled “*Medemer*<sup>8</sup> Journey” argues that:

*“Controlling religion is controlling the people; the people of Ethiopia are tightly loyal to their religion. Both Islam and Christians are strictly abided by their religious dogma. Thus, controlling these religions creates fertile ground to control the public; this in turn helps to regulate the political landscape, legal institutions and other social values.”*

Accordingly, the post 2018 cadres following the footprint of the prime minister inculcate religious languages in public spaces against the principle of assertive secularism stated under article 11 of the living FDRE constitution. The premier shows intent to systematically co-opt with religions that is why his religious remarks are sometimes confusing, and he tends to adjust his language according to his audiences (Østebø, 2023) mainly to garner at most political support from the religious groups and was successful.

<sup>6</sup> Dr. Abiy Ahmed’s Speech at the Reconciliation Conference of the Orthodox Church.” YouTube, July 26, 2018.

<https://youtu.be/83yinHVMYuA?si=pcdPUa7p7arf4DI9> (accessed on December 24, 2023).

<sup>7</sup> Dr. Abiy Ahmed Speech at the prosperity party conference, broadcast on EBC, March 13, 2022.

<https://youtu.be/RSJb3WkcEKg?si=whfm4WQsTTPenhCV> (accessed on December 24, 2023)

<sup>8</sup> Amharic word equivalent with Synergy

## Does Prosperity Regime Repressing EOTC?

Notwithstanding the nature and type of government interventions in religious affairs, the post 2018 regime gives wide space to religion and its rhetoric in its political discourse. Beyond co-optation, the Prosperity regime also devised different tactics to limit religious institutions in general and EOTC in particular in the public space. In what follows, the researcher critically examines whether the church is oppressed or not.

### Schism in the EOTC – Government Response

Though the schism in the church has a back history or precedent<sup>9</sup>, the ordination of the 26 new Bishops without the knowledge of the Holy Synod on 22 January 2023 in Oromia region by the three Orthodox Archbishops was blowing news to the church and the faithful at large. The leader of the so-called “The Synod of Oromia and Nations and Nationalities” defended that “the schism was as a result of Oromo’s unfair representation in the position of the EOTC synod and failure to use Oromo language in the church services.<sup>10</sup>” However, as Desta Heliso commented on Addis Standard (2023) the issue behind the split led by the bishops is highly motivated by political motives not of religious one, manifested by ethno-centric goals. Although the principal Synod excommunicated the three bishops and the newly ordained 25 episcopates, the new synod were appointed its bishops in different dioceses by militant takeovers of these churches.

The reaction of the Prosperity led regime during and after the schism in the Orthodox Church, however, is claimed by the church and other actors as repression against the legal personality and very existence of the church. The government force, specifically the Oromia special force and police were involved in the takeover of the churches at the expense of the age-old Orthodox Church (Addis Standard, 2022). The Human Right Commission of Ethiopia has also confirmed the excessive use of force by government security forces during such clashes in Shashemene, the capital of West Arsi Zone<sup>11</sup>.

The Holy Synod in reacting the government action insists that, “the reality on the ground is that the casualties/schism were committed through the direct support of the regional government; shows government’s interference in the internal affairs of the church against the constitution which is a coup d’état on the synod<sup>12</sup>.” In principle, the government is responsible to protect the church and its faithful as a legal person from the illegal ones. However, in practice the special force under the auspices of the regional government led by Shimelis Abedesssa, directly involved in the breakaway of the church gates and the killings of the priests and faithful in the day lights.

Opposition political parties also exposed the unnecessary government intervention in the church’s internal affairs at the expense of the principal Orthodox Church. The Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice (shortly called E-ZEMA) in a press release related to the schism condemn the government; “we are concerned with the measures taken by the security forces in contradiction to article 11 of the constitution<sup>13</sup>.” The party also noted that “recently we have observed the intervention of the government in the internal affairs of the church in different aspects potentially resulting in bad consequences.” Thus, the incumbent regime is not abided by the principle of secularism stated under article 11 of the constitution.

Beyond a simple intervention, there are groups accusing the intent of the government to oppress and eliminate the ancient Orthodox Church from the politico-economic and social arena of the republic. “Through infiltrating ethnic entrepreneurs in the church, the government is working indirectly and industriously to dismantle the very institutional existence of the Orthodox Church.<sup>14</sup>” In similar ways the Amhara affiliated association called the Amhara Association of America (AAA) insists that the attack under the leadership of the government up on the church is part of Abiy’s regime plan to demolish icon and marker of Ethiopia unity<sup>15</sup>.” Such accusations however are not from the scratch; the regime shows intents in different trainings to upgrade religious thought of different religion in a way that fits with the political ideology of Prosperity, synergy otherwise. René Lefort (2020) commented that the prosperity led regime under the auspices of Abiy Ahmed, in contradiction to the principle of secularism aims to “pentecostalism Ethiopian

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<sup>9</sup> A head of the formation of The Synod of Oromia and Nations and Nationalities, there was a movement and progress to establish the so-called *Oromia bet-kihinet* that laid foundation for the schism

<sup>10</sup> Briefing paper by the peace research facility and Rift Valley institute on March 2023 entitled Religion, Politics and the State in Ethiopia

<sup>11</sup> Press release of EHRC cited from Addis Standard on 4<sup>th</sup> March 2023

<sup>12</sup> Press Release of the Holy Synod on the schism

<sup>13</sup> E-ZEMA press conference on 31<sup>st</sup> January 2023

<sup>14</sup> Enat Party press release on 24 June 2023

<sup>15</sup> Press release from AAA on 6 February 2023

politics<sup>16</sup>” or indoctrinating prosperity gospel. Split in the Orthodox Church and officials presence in the back door of the schism is not solely limited to the so-called The Synod of Oromia and Nations and Nationalities, but in other regions too.

On 7 May, 2021, another threat to the oldest institution happened. In Tigray regional state bishops disclosed the establishment of a new patriarchate so called “the see of Selama Kesate Birehan. The justification, they insist, is failure of the holy synod to defend the killing of the clergy, the destruction of the churches and other religious heritages during the war in between the central government and TPLF (Addis Standard, 2023). On July 23 and 30, 2023 the new synod in Tigray appointed 9 bishops followed by excommunication by the principal synod.

The role of TPLF in the formation of the Patriarchate is not underestimated. The Holy Synod in a press release insists that “this illegal organization has been planned for a long time; the Holy Synod recognized that it was organized by individuals who were carrying out a deep-rooted hidden agenda with the help of political and government officials from time to time<sup>17</sup>.” Of course TPLF’s manipulation within the church is a day time reality. An “intelligence group” was formed to scout out the church’s main monasteries and administrative structures that would help their mission’s accomplishment (Aregawi, 2008). Thus, the see of *Selam Kesate Berhan* is the extension of TPLF’s early day manipulation of the church. That is why the regional television (Tigray Tv) live broadcast<sup>18</sup> the appointment of the bishops. This is therefore another sound testimony that the regime is marching against the very unity of the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahedo* Church.

Beside the above mentioned factions there are also groups who appointed themselves as bishops in East Gojjam Diocese, *Qoga Kidane Mihret* monastery. In an urgent meeting held on June 9, 2020 the Holy Synod deprived them of ecclesiastical power and thus restricting them from serving in the church. The Synod further established a 9 membered committee to see the details of the issue. The split however left unresolved. This faction called themselves “Ancient Orthodox Church” while others labeled them “*Qibat* believers” and the split is interwoven with the age-old debate over the teachings of Christology.

	<b>Synod of Oromia and Nations and Nationalities</b>	<b>The see of <i>Selam Kesate Berhan</i></b>	<b>Ancient Ethiopia Orthodox Church ‘Qibat’</b>
Precedent	The formation of Oromia patriarchate within EOTC	TPLF’s manipulation of the church since its gorilla war	The entrance of Portugal soldiers in support of the war against Ahmed Grange
Perceived Cause	Issue of Language usage and ethnic proportion in the principal synod	Silence of the synod during the war in Tigray	The age-old debate over the discourse of Christology – dogma
Government reactions	Involved in the takeover against EOTC	The regional government implicitly supports and broadcasts the appointment.	-
EOTC reaction	Excommunication	Excommunication	Excommunication
Location	Oromia Regional State	Tigray Regional State	Amhara Regional State

Table 1: Summary of the nature and government reaction of the schism in EOTC

### Casualties on the Church and the Faithful

In the consecutive years since the onset of the 2018 political reform, killing of orthodox-Amhara background and the burning of orthodox churches have been clearly observed and confirmed by domestic and international organizations and authors in the area. “There was violence towards Ethiopian Orthodox clergy and believers in different areas of the country, which led to increasing

<sup>16</sup> A commentary by Rene Lefort on 24<sup>th</sup> December 2020 on Ethiopian Insight <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2020/12/24/mind-over-matter-abiy-ahmeds-aim-to-pentecostalize-ethiopian-politics/>

<sup>17</sup> A press release by the EOTC on 2<sup>nd</sup> of August 2023 accessed from the official facebook page of EOTC media agency.

<sup>18</sup> Broadcast on Tigray TV on 3<sup>rd</sup> of August 2023 retrieved on 28 December 2023 Link:

<https://www.youtube.com/live/aE4AvTgs0NA?si=VDT2W8y7qZfWrzWx>

concerns about Abiy’s inaction in protecting the faithful.<sup>19</sup> Similar to this argument Tsegaye (2020) also confirms that massacre, displacement, oppression and harassment of Christians and burning of churches and prohibition of public Christian ceremonies are frequent adversities of Orthodox Christians in current Ethiopia.

Reports also revealed that in the quarters of EOTC there is an increasing discontent over the failure of the regime to give legal protection to Orthodox-Amhara from recurrent damage and religious violence<sup>20</sup>. A U.S based international organization; International Religious Freedom (IRF) reports the status of religious freedom of every country annually. Accordingly, the report from 2018 up to 2022 shows a wide range of damage on the Ethiopian Orthodox church and its followers, summarized in the below table.

Year	Month and Date	Region	Casualties
2018	August 4	Somali, Jigjig town	6 priest killed, 8 churches burned
	August 9	Amhara, North Wollo, Woldia	8 killed and 16 wounded
2019	July 18	SNNP, Sidama Zone	1 Priest and 2 follower killed and 3 churches buried
	October	Oromia	8 follower killed
2020	September 6,7,and 13	Benshangul Gumuz	80 killed, 1 church buried, 600 member forced to flee, orthodox markers demolished
	August 26 –September	Oromia	500* killed following the killing of singer Hachalu Hundessa
	January 19/20	Dire Dawa	1 killed, 21 injured
	November 1	Oromia, Gawa Qana	54 killed predominantly Christian
2021	November – April	Tigray	78 priests killed
	March 5	Oromia	29 killed at Abo church, East Wollega
	November 28 and 29	Tigray	800 civilian in Marry of Zion fest
2022	January	Oromia	3 killed at Woybela Mariyam church, 10 injured
	October	Oromia	1 deacon killed and 11 worshipper kidnapped
2023**	December	Oromia, Arsi Zone	72 killed, burning of houses
Total casualties =			1641 killed, 12 church burned etc.

\*The Oromia police force reports 239 killings, while Barnabas Fund reports 500.

\*\* sourced from EOTC press Statement on 5<sup>th</sup> of December 2023

Table 2: Summary of the annual reports of IRF showing damage on Ethiopian Orthodox Church (2018-2022)

The report of IRF thus shows how much the church is at risk since the coming of Abiy Ahmed’s regime. Leave alone the unreported damage (due to blockage of telecommunication, internet, and transport), taking the data from the IRF only, thousands of priests and followers are killed because they are orthodox followers, dozens of churches burned and thousands are displaced. The mentioned damages are committed by the security force or the failure of it to keep citizens from the illegal militant groups, especially the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) – Shane and Gumuz militant. On a press release *Enat* Party condemn the government, “in the local

<sup>19</sup> Briefing paper by the peace research facility and Rift Vally institute on March 2023 entitled Religion, Politics and the State in Ethiopia

<sup>20</sup> *ibid*



government structures of Oromia regional state, officials are directly and indirectly involved in the mass killing of the faithful and the system is the orchestrator of the genocide and so we are not claiming justice from the criminals.<sup>21</sup>

### **The Politicization and Ethnicization of EOTC**

The overthrow of the monarchy and the introduction of secularism in 1974 boldly diminished the influence of the church in the state. Beyond its role as a religion of the state, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was exposed to multiple attacks perceiving it as a prominent part of the monarchy power structure (Mohammed, 2018). The church is thus accused of double trends; it is perceived as an instrument of oppression of the age-old monarchy; and in other ways ethno-nationalists since their inception propagate as if it is a religion of a single ethnic group, Amhara otherwise. Speaking in otherwise TPLF/EPRDF elites covertly narrated just as the EOTC was serving as a tool used for the Amhara ethnic group to oppress other Ethiopian ethnic groups (Solomon, 2021). Hammering the Amhara ethnic group and EOTC in the same name is evident, but wrongly installed by ethnocrats.

The church is misinterpreted and misrepresented mainly by Tigrian and Oromo ethno-nationalist from different aspects including its spiritual or doctrinal issues, evangelization activities, clergies and bishops, cultural legacies and the relationship it had with the state (Tsegaye, 2020). However, in the reach of the researcher, the dogma and canon of the church is indiscriminate to race, ethnicity, sex and the like. Indeed it is true that most Amharas are the early orthodox believers, but it does not mean that all Amhara are Christian orthodox. And never also mean that there are no other ethnic groups that are Orthodox Christians.

Extreme ethno-nationalist of Oromo defined Orthodox Christianity as a religion of the Abyssinians (the Amharas) and perceived the church as racist for the Oromo nations (Asafa, 2004). It is arguable that the politicization of the church coupled with identity politics escalates attack on the church and its followers. Ethnic entrepreneurs understood the church's spiritual mission as an instrument of "colonization" and "destruction of indigenous peoples. They also associate poverty with the church arguing "the cause of poverty of the Oromos, is assumed to be related with the occupation of a large proportion of land and veneration of saints by the EOTC (Gebru, 1993). Ethnic nationalists therefore see the EOTC as the enemy of their ethnic group. "Oromo nationalists, for instance, built Oromo nationalism against these features: the Orthodox Christians, Amharic language, and Amhara culture" (Solomon, 2021).

The ethnicization and politicization of EOTC is not without violence; instead, it is causing both physical and epistemic destruction on the EOTC and its believers (ibid). The casualties on the faithful sometimes supported by governmental apparatus and Islamic political fundamentalist were frequently occurring in different parts of Oromia, Gedeo, Somali, Sidama and Benishagul Gumuz particularly in between 2017 and 2020<sup>22</sup>. The politicization, murdering and oppression of Christians, burning of churches, confiscation of public Christian holiday places and the like are increasing from time to time partly because of the collaboration and negligence of local government authorities (Tsegaye, 2020). In a nutshell, either by the direct involvement of the government or failure to protect the church and its followers, the post 1974 system is oppressing EOTC against the principle of religious freedom.

### **Enclavement of Orthodox from Political Power**

Another symptom of oppression is the systematic elimination of orthodox followers from high ranking political positions or what Turner calls enclavement. It is a physical exclusion of certain religious groups who are perceived as a threat to the incumbent regime. Enclavement is a technique to regulate a specific religious group that potentially includes a strategy of exclusion with an intention to limit certain religious groups (Turner, 2007) from socio-political and economic involvement.

In terms of religious demography, the EOTC takes absolute lead. According to the estimate of 2016 by the U.S government 44 percent of the total population are followers of EOTC (IRF, 2022). That is if the Ethiopia population is 120 million; half a million or so are orthodox followers. The World Population Review (2023) also confirms that 44 percent of Ethiopia's population are adherent to Ethiopia Orthodox Church. So, even though the political landscape does not allow religion based power distribution, de-facto presence of religious proportion in the political positions in a country where religion is highly valued is mandatory to create a sense of belongingness and cultural equality. Or systematic elimination of certain religious groups in the name of secularism from key political positions is repression or intent of enclavement. Keeping their personal privacy, the researcher undertook a snowballing survey on the respective religious affiliation of top government officials, focusing on executive organs of the government; 24 ministers (including the prime minister and the two deputy prime ministers) and chief executive of the 13 regional states and Mayor of the two special cities; Addis Ababa and Dre Dawa.

<sup>21</sup> Enat Party press release 20<sup>th</sup> of November 2023 on the killing of 35 orthodox believers on November 23 and 27 in Oromia region, East Arsi Zone, Sherka woreda.

<sup>22</sup> BCC Amharic: <https://www.bbc.com/amharic/45080641> accessed on 2nd of January 2024

Position	Orthodox	Muslim	Evangelical	Others
Cabinets /24 ministers/	16.6%	45.8	37.5	-
Chief executive of regional state/ president/ including Dre Dawa & Addis Ababa – 15	13.3%	46.6	40%	-
Demographic ratio*	44%	31%	23%	2%

\*International Religious Freedom Report, 2022

As shown above in a country where 44 percent of the total population are orthodox Christian followers, the first three key political positions; the prime minister and the two deputy prime ministers are non-orthodox. And only 16.6% of the cabinets are orthodox while 46.6% are Muslim and 37.5% are protestants/Evangelical. Such takeover of key political positions potentially at the expense of the orthodox followers is not a simple political calculation, unless it is repression. In addition, from the 15 key positions of chief executive of a regional state (including Addis Ababa and Dre Dawa) only 13.3 % percent of orthodox people lead the regional State, while 46.6% and 40% are Muslim and evangelical respectively. Such a political manoeuvre, the researcher argues, is not abruptly happening but with an intention to physically distance orthodox believers from key political decisions, who potentially challenge government oppression against orthodox discussed in the aforementioned sub sections.

### Concluding Remarks

The introduction of secularism in Ethiopia (assertive kind) was not properly considering the huge societal value of religion. Curtailing religion from the public sphere where 98% of the populations are faithful is not only impractical but also deprives the contribution of religions for socio-economic development and national security. As a result, the consecutive regimes failed to practice secularism as stated in their constitution. Instead, they tightly regulated religious institutions through the deployment of co-option and oppression.

The Military regime, in the name of secularism, committed physical and epistemic casualties on the ancient and huge Orthodox Church. The execution of the holy patriarch, father Tewoflos, is unforgettable in the face of the church. The regime sometimes co-opted and in other times oppressed the church to indoctrinate socialism as a political ideology at any cost of the church. The TPLF-led EPRDF regime had also matched against EOTC from cave to palace and exploited it through the systematically recruited cadre-priests, cadre-bishops and intelligence groups. Sadly, the regime replaced the Patriarch and forced the principal one to exile which is a bold canonical breach. Almost for three decades, TPLF had become the alpha-omega of the republic; the Orthodox Church from the Holy Synod up to the single diocese fell under the tight control of the cadres.

EOTC, under Abiy Ahmed’s premiership, has not escaped from co-option and repression. In his early days, the prime minister co-opted the church and contributed to the reconciliation of the exile synod with the home synod. The church and the followers praised and warmly welcomed the prime minister. Yet, in the later days the Orthodox Church and its followers have been facing uncountable and series of damages. The killing of the faithful, the burning of the churches, displacement, are becoming daily news. Schism of the Synod followed by the takeover of the churches by the illegal synod-so called “synod of Oromia and nations nationalities' ' by the direct support of the Oromia special police force shakes the church and the state at large. Therefore, the study finds that the prosperity party co-opted and repressed the church against article 11 of the FDRE constitution.

Lastly, the researcher strongly argues the version of secularism practice in Ethiopia is not about separation of state and religion. Instead, secularism is becoming a de-facto religion of the system. The regimes through co-option and repression forced the Orthodox Church to upgrade its canon, holy day festivity and other church ceremonies. This is an intent to renew the age-old religion in a way that fits with the political philosophy of synergy (so called *Medemer*) and the new technologies which is in a total contradiction of the foundation of the orthodox church discourse.

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