Journal for the Study of the Religions of Africa and its Diaspora 3.1 (October 2017): 110-124

Ethiopia's Ahbash Path to Religious Moderation and Countering Extremism: Pitfalls and Discontents

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Abstract

Ethiopia is a religiously diverse state with a history of largely cordial relationships among religious groups except from the occasional confrontation and mistrust. However, the relatively peaceful coexistence seems to be losing ground for intolerance and religious extremism in recent years. Both inter- and intra-religious conflicts are not uncommon to observe. Intra-religious conflicts within the Muslim community are surfacing mainly between the Sufi- and Salafi-oriented groups either along doctrinal lines or competition for controlling Islamic institutions. Equally worrying is the role of the government in 'mediating the conflict'. Sufism is now gaining momentum around government policy circles to be promoted as a strategy for countering religious extremism. Sufis represented by Ahbash are now receiving 'undue government favour' often at the exclusion of the Salafis who are accused of harbouring religious intolerance and extremist ideas. In this regard, the government is running the risk of embracing an 'official Islam' viewed as moderate, apolitical and correct at the exclusion of extremist, political and 'distorted Islam' quite in contradiction with the constitutional principle of secularism. This paper examines the threats of religious extremism in post-1991 Ethiopia and interrogates the government policies and practices taking into account the regional and geopolitical contexts. It identifies the actors, their roles, power positions and mobilisation strategies in the conflict.

KEY WORDS: Ahbash, Sufism, Salafism, Countering Extremism, Religious Moderation, Secularism

Introduction

Geographically, Ethiopia is located in East Africa – sharing borders with Sudan and South Sudan in the west, Kenya in the south, Somalia and Djibouti in the east and Eritrea in the north. It has a population of close to one hundred million. It is characterised by an extraordinary diversity composed of several ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural communities. It is also an early home for all major monotheistic

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world religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam). The current religious composition is about 63% Christian and 34% Muslim. The remaining being divided among indigenous and other religious groups (CSA, 2007). Its religious past is characterised by both consensual and conflictual relationships (Hussein, 2006). People to people relations between Christians and Muslims were generally cordial but the State's attitude – at least up to 1974 – towards all religions other than Orthodox Christianity was unfavourable and negative. Islam was treated unfairly during the imperial regimes where all the rulers envisioned religious homogenisation as their ultimate goal. The *Derg* regime that succeeded the last imperial regime in 1974 was not any better for minority religious communities in particular and for all religions in general. It was anti-religious in orientation and its goal was 'constructing a religious-free socialist Ethiopia'.

The 1991 regime change ushered a new era of religious freedom and equality. The 1995 Constitution anchored the principle of separation of State and religion and guaranteed freedom of religion. However, the practice on the ground demonstrated that a great deal remained to be done to implement the constitutional promises. Religious groups are complaining now and then about government's encroachment in their religious affairs contrary to the principle of secularism. The government, in its turn, is complaining about the growing influence of religious extremism with the ambition of establishing a religious government in Ethiopia. For tackling the problem, it devised different mechanisms. Among others, the government is actively engaging in supporting those religious groups which are supposed to be apolitical and tolerant. In particular, the government is involved in the internal debates and conflicts among the Muslims – as manifested in controlling the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (hereafter, EIASC) leadership – between the Sufi- and Salafi-oriented Muslims in favour of the Sufis as they are dubbed 'moderate and apolitical'. Hence, its policies and strategies mainly focus on promoting and encouraging Sufism with complete disregard for the constitutional provision of 'strict separation between State and religion' (art 11). This has resulted in a backlash effect where large Muslim crowds protested, particularly after 2011, against what they call 'government meddling in purely religious affairs'.

However, the government denied it as simple allegation without concrete evidence. According to different government sources (Addis Raey, 2012:21-23; *Yehaimanot*, 2011), it is only the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (popularly called Mejilis, hereafter, Mejilis) that invited Ahbash from Lebanon and organised their training. The role of the government was limited to delivering speeches related to the constitutional rights and duties of believers at the beginning of the training and providing security for the trainees and trainers (ibid).

Against the backdrop of accusation and counter-accusation, this paper investigates the extent to which the government was involved in the promotion and dissemination of Ahbash (Sufi) religious teaching and how plausible the claims of the activists are and appraises the fear of the government regarding religious extremism in the country, taking into account the geopolitical and global contexts. The paper is organised into three major parts, in addition to the brief reflections on the distinctions between Sufi and Salafi Muslims. The first part will discuss the strategies employed by States, other than Ethiopia, in East Africa for countering religious extremism and the influence of the US government over such countries' policies and strategies. The second part will thoroughly elaborate the Ahbash issue: both its origin and development in Ethiopia and outside. The subsequent part discusses the coming of Ahbash to Ethiopia and the reaction of Ethiopian Muslims. In doing so, I will try to first identify the actors involved and their

interest of its coming and investigate the Muslims' responses in line with the legal provisions of the country. Finally, I will conclude by appraising the fears of Muslims in the religious meddling of the government and the fears of the government for religious extremism and the drawbacks of its counter-extremism strategies.

Sufi – Salafi Distinctions: Some Reflections

For the sake of clarity, Sufism and Salafism are not separate sects within Islam but differ only in their interpretation. Both of them support the necessity of applying *shari'a* law (Islamic law) but the focus of the former is on individual devotion and direct relationship between man and God. In most cases, Sufis reject the notion of violence to achieve their goals as opposed to the Salafis who believe that believers should be agents of social change to improve worldly affairs (Muedini, 2015). The Salafis advocate that 'a polity governed by *shari'a* (*Dar ul Islam*)' is necessary to bring about justice in a society (Abdi, 2015). In effect, the group advocates that Salafi-dominance in all aspects of life (including politics) is a necessary condition to implement their convictions (ibid).

Originally, the Sufi practice started during the time of the Prophet Mohammed where his follower's drew inspiration from his words and deeds (Engineer, 2010). They closely watched his activities and lived around him imitating his practices called *Ahl al-suffa* (ibid). These were considered to be the first Sufi Muslim community in the world but later divided into several schools of thought (ibid)[2]. Spiritualism is the main focus of the Sufis and perfecting their inner egos by minimising greed for materialism is their ultimate goal. Those who achieved the highest level of spiritualism through religious learning could be role models for the masses. Moreover, Sufis are receptive to the cultural norms of society enabling integration into the religion of Islam. In other words, they are accommodative of local cultures through Islam where it enabled them to attract a large number of followers. Their practice has received warm support from multicultural societies across the world (Engineer, 2010).

With regard to politics, the Sufis preach non-involvement in political affairs by gearing their efforts towards spiritualism. They engage in appealing for love instead of power. Sufism preaches to remain peaceful and apolitical (Hanieh, 2011:181). This, however, does not mean that all Sufis have the same position on the role of religion in politics as some do advocate active involvement depending on the circumstances of time and space. In some instances, the Sufis may be even more violent and politically active in defending their interests and justify violence to fight against authorities in power. Their fierce resistance against the colonial regime has been witnessed both in Africa and the Middle East. The Sufi-oriented Mahdist Movement of Sudan and Somalia directed against the British colonial power were good examples (Dereje and Bruce Lawrence, 2014:19). The Mahdist Movement, led by a Sufi leader Mohammed Ahmad, who proclaimed himself Mahdi (one who is guided by Allah), expressed its social, political and religious grievances against the British colonial rule at the end of the 19th c (Erlich, 1994:65). Interestingly, the Mahdists established an Islamic State of Sudan after independence modelled on the 7th century Islamic State of the Prophet (ibid). Mohammed Abdille Hassan, nicknamed by his detractors as 'Mad Mullah', who came from the Sufi community of Somalia was ferocious in fighting against the British colonisers (Furnish, 2013:10) through an Islamic *jihad* (Erlich, 1994). One of the most

[2] The four schools of thought in Islam are the Shafi, Hanafi, Maliki and Hanbali.

renowned Sufi Centres in Ethiopia, Jamma Nigus in Wollo, had witnessed the most violent conflict between the Sufi-oriented Muslims and the Christian King of Ethiopia during the 20th century. Its leader Sheikh Mohammed Shafi, who rejected the legitimacy of the Christian King to rule his Muslim population, declared *jihad* against the King and resulted in the devastation of the area by the two forces (Dereje and Bruce Lawrence, 2014).

The Salafi groups, on the other hand, emerged as opponents to the practice of Sufism. The Salafis perceive the Sufis as 'corrupt and spoiler of the true Islamic teaching'. The word Salafi comes from *al-salaf* which means 'pious predecessors' signifying the return to 'pure Islam' (Moussalli, 2009:11). The beliefs of the Salafis entail that some of the practices of the Sufis such as visiting tombs, saint veneration and the conflation of Islam with cultural practices spoils the religion. They consider such practices as *shirk* (associating partners with Allah), which is one of the greatest sins in Islam (Engineer, 2010). By doing so, the Salafis are more exclusionist; people who practice such activities are rejected from the Muslim *ummah* (community) and labelled as *kufar* (non-believer). They, instead, advocate for the return of the Muslim *ummah* to pure Islam based on the teachings of Quran and Hadith (Moussalli, 2009).

It is obvious that 'an ideology of purity' leads to extremism where others supposed to be non-pure face denunciation attack (both verbal and physical). The Salafis, in most cases, consider other groups as non-pure and by implication *kufar*. They are anti-pluralist in orientation and religiously intolerant of other believers (Esposito, 2010:77). They instead work to promote and impose their own version of Islam on others. This strategy of imposing their religion as a mandate for fulfilling the commands of God obviously entails violence and extremism (ibid). For this reason, the appeal of Sufism for spirituality, tolerance, peaceful coexistence with other religions and cultures, and their little zeal for politics attracts many policy-makers and politicians across the world to encourage and promote their practices and teachings often at the exclusion of Salafism. The multicultural nature of today's world even made Sufism an 'ideal candidate' for States to work with and promote its ideologies and teachings.

Promoting Sufism for Countering Religious Extremism

The 9/11 terrorist attack ushered in a new era of global terrorism and its logical consequence of employing methods of counter-terrorism strategies by state and non-state actors. As number one victim of this attack, the US took the lead in countering terrorism through forming what is termed as 'an alliance of the willing' (Esposito, 2010). To avoid the flavour of the war as West (Christian) vs. Muslim, the US policy-makers developed a strategy of recruiting Muslim partners (at state and non-state level) who are believed to be 'moderate, tolerant and friendly with Western governments and the Western way of life' (ibid). Many have come up with an idea that defeating terrorism by military might alone could not be possible unless some sort of cooperation is made with moderate Muslims against hard-liner extremists (Muedini, 2015). Hence, they started to sponsor 'tolerant and friendly Muslims' for their ideology to prevail over extremists. In this regard, Sufism became the preferred candidate for them as an 'ideological weapon' to attack the Salafi extremists. Taking into account the leading political and economic role of the United States, it should come as no surprise that its policy of promoting Sufism has influenced other States' policies and actions in handling their Muslim

communities and countering religious extremism. Many countries, if not all, followed suit.

Countering Religious Extremism in East Africa

The governments of Djibouti, Somalia, Kenya and Ethiopia initiated policies and strategies for supporting the activities of Sufis in their fight against terrorism and in their bid to secure US-aid 'invested for rehabilitating Sufi shrines and teachings across the world'. One of the counter-terrorism strategies of the US government in this region is to "identify mainstream and Sufi Muslim sectors and helping them propagate moderate interpretations of Islam and delegitimize terrorism" (Rand Corporation Report, 2009: xii). The US government encourages the above mentioned countries to support and sponsor Sufi-practices (Furnish, 2013). Hence, sponsoring Sufism became a government 'choice and agenda' in these States (Abdi, 2015). They invested their best in promoting Sufi education, securing Islamic organisations to be filled by Sufi leaders and encouraging Sufi shrines to flourish through State sponsored rehabilitation programmes.

The governments of Djibouti and Somalia, for example, have governmental religious agencies to register and monitor religious activities (Rand Corporation, 2009:30). Both authorities discourage the activities of Wahhabis and have strategies for subsidising mosques and paying salaries for *imams* who are supposed to be moderate and Sufi (ibid). The government of Kenya organised and hosted several regional and international Sufi conferences in its jurisdictions. A three-day conference was held in the city of Mackinnon in August 2015 by Sufi clerics from Kenya, Somalia, Tanzania, Uganda, Ethiopia and Democratic Republic of Congo named as *The International Sufi Conference for East Africa* (Abdi, 2015:2). The conference was organised with the purpose of countering religious extremism and finding alternatives to the radical stands of the Salafi groups in the region. Among other things, the participants reached an agreement to encourage and promote Sufism in the region to undermine the activities of the radicals and counter religious extremism through their respective governments' support. The government of Ethiopia, using Mejilis as a surrogate, involved in the coming and promotion of Ahbash (Sufi) in the country, angered the Muslim community and precipitated sustained protests as shall be discussed below.

Ahbash and the Ethiopian Muslim Protest—Ahbash: Origin and Development

Ahbash is believed to have been established in Lebanon in 1930 under the leadership of Sheikh Ahmad al-Ajuz as a philanthropic project and spiritualist movement officially named the Association of Islamic Charitable Projects (AICP) (Hamzeh, 1996:3). The association was later overtaken by the followers of an Ethiopian Sheikh named Abdullah al-Harari or al-Habeshi[3], to signify his origin, and popularly became Ahbash. Al-Harari presided over the association starting from 1983 following the death of al-Ajuz. Al-Harari was born around 1910 in the city of Harar.

The contemporary rivalry between the Ahbash and Salafi/Wahhabi groups in Ethiopia is rooted in the ancient Islamic city of Harar (Kabha and Haggai Erlich, 2012).

[3] The term *al-Ahbash* is denoted in Arabic to indicate the country of origin of the leader of the organisation.

Harar was incorporated into the Christian-dominated Empire of Ethiopia in 1887 following the defeat of its leader Emir Abdullahi at the battle of Chelenqo by Menelik II (1889-1913) (Bahru, 2002). The incorporation of Harar into Ethiopia had far-reaching implications for Harar, especially on its Islamic character and teaching. As the Christian-dominated administration, the rulers from Addis Ababa were not happy to see a strong Islamic teaching centre in their kingdom. They rather worked to weaken the Islamic influence in all parts of Ethiopia. Emperor Menelik – though 'accommodative of religious differences' – was well-known for his policy of inducement of Muslim elites through incentive and persuasion (Markakis, 1974). Those moderate Muslims who accepted his kingship and Christian-dominated administration as legitimate were rewarded with titles and maintaining their leadership positions (Clapham, 2013). He, however, was harsher in the administration of Harar because of stiff resistance from the local Muslim population and was aggressive in weakening the Islamic identity of Harar (Clapham, 2013). Emperor Haile Selassie (1930-1974), like his predecessor, did his best to divide the city's Muslim population along doctrinal lines to weaken their political leverage. It was in this atmosphere that the two rival Islamic teachings emerged under the manipulation of the central imperial government (*Yemuslimoch Guday*, 2012). In short, the two rival groups played into the hands of the Emperor and served the interests of the Empire to weaken the unity of Muslims.

Their rift was further aggravated by the Italian occupation of Ethiopia (1936-1941) with the involvement of external actors, including Saudi Arabia. The brief invasion of the country by the Italian fascist forces had stimulated many Muslims to carry-out a religious pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia. For their infamous 'divide and rule policy', the Italian fascist forces encouraged Muslims to practise their religion knowing that Muslims were long marginalised by the Christian emperors (Hussein, 2006). As a result of their exposure to the outside Muslim *ummah*, many Harari Muslims came under the influence of Salafi/Wahhabi teaching that focuses mainly on Islamic scriptures and the literal interpretation of the Quran rejecting 'culture-oriented and un-Islamic Sufi-practices'. As a consequence, they started an Islamic revival in the city of Harar by purging Islam of 'un-Islamic practices' such as saint veneration, celebration of *mewlid* (birthday of the Prophet), acts of intercession and visiting tombs.

The two groups began to fight for Islamic revivalism and independence in their own understanding of 'Islamic independence'. One of such groups (Sufi/Ahbash) was led by Abdullah al-Harari and the other (Salafi/Wahhabi) by Sheikh Yusuf Abdulrahman al-Harari. Based on Mustafa Kabha and Haggai Erlich (2012), Sheikh Yusuf Abdulrahman al-Harari was a Saudi-educated Wahhabi advocator who often involved in the verbal war against Ahbash. In some other sources, however, Yusuf Abdulrahman al-Harari was seen as a, 'liberator of Islam and Harar from moral depreciation and some repugnant practices' following its occupation by Italy. As stated by *Yemuslimoch Guday (2012)*, Sheikh Yusuf went to Saudi Arabia during the Italian occupation but returned in 1939. Upon arrival, he realised that Harar was completely changed. Her Islamic character was replaced with practices which are 'repugnant to public (Islamic) morality'. Drinking alcohol, prostitution, worshipping shrines and chewing *chat* became 'accepted norms' in the city. To deal with such problems, he established a national Islamic association called *al-Jami'a Wetenil Islamiya*. Its major purpose was to alleviate the problem of moral laxity among the people of Harar and to return to it its former Islamic reputation. He then continued by establishing other religious and academic schools and institutions by collecting money from local Muslim residents (ibid). However, the association faced tough resistance from Sheikh Abdullah al-Harari who had active support from the

imperial regime of Emperor Haile Selassie (*Yemuslimoch Guday*, 2012:273). Abdullah al-Harari was on the side of the Emperor in the fight against the so-called Wahhabi groups. Some sources indicate that he was an active collaborator with the Christian-dominated imperial regime to suppress the Muslims of Harar. He was accused of constantly spying on the Muslim community and supplying information for the Christian Emperor about the activities of various Islamic institutions and schools operating in the city as if they were plotting against the existing regime (*Yemuslimoch Guday*, 2012). Nonetheless, he and his followers denied the accusation and in turn they accused Sheikh Yusuf and his followers of being instruments of the Haile Selassie government by suppressing Muslims (Kabha and Haggai Erlich, 2006:522).

With a varied degree of influence and collaboration with successive Ethiopian governments, the two rivals came into conflict afresh in the 2011 Ahbash controversy where the incumbent government is alleged to have been involved on the side of Abdullah al-Harari for 'the indoctrination of Ethiopian Muslims with Ahbash religious ideology' (Yuunus, 2013). Despite the allegation, the Ethiopian government denied its 'direct role' in the invitation of Ahbash Islamic scholars from Lebanon (Addis Raey, 2012). But it stressed that, the government had legitimate security concerns related to religious extremism and terrorism, particularly from its neighbours such as Somalia, Sudan and Eritrea (Ministry of Information, 2002) leading it to watch closely the activities of religious groups.

The Coming of Ahbash to Ethiopia and Actors Involved

Broadly speaking, there are three major actors involved in the coming and promotion of Ahbash religious ideology in Ethiopia. These are: Mejilis, the Ethiopian government and US government.

The Role of Mejilis

Did Mejilis really want 'to do business' from the importation and sponsoring of Ahbash by national and international actors? Certainly, it is very difficult to provide a precise answer of 'Yes' or 'No' to the above question. What makes it more difficult is, for many of the top leadership of Mejilis, that the researcher posed questions such as, 'whether Mejilis has been involved in importing and sponsoring Ahbash'; almost all 'categorically rejected this as a false accusation and replied with similar responses to that of the government'. Many of them rejected the accusation and are of the opinion that 'Ahbash is part of *nebaru islimina* – indigenous Islam' (Azam, 2012). Sheikh Azam[4], said that:

> It is called *Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jama'ah*, which was part of Ethiopian Islam from the very beginning and I don't know from where they [referring to the Muslims' Solution Finding Committee] brought the name Ahbash. We planned the training only to counter religious extremism. When there is religious extremism, it is our [Mejilis's] responsibility to provide training for our community about religious tolerance and educating Muslims about the basic tenets of their religion. If there is anything done contrary to the *deen* (religion) in the training, they can complain about it. But I believe nothing wrong has been done. They are simply

[4] Interview conducted by the researcher with Sheikh Azam Yusuf, Vice President of Mejilis, in Addis Ababa on 22 April 2012.

> disseminating 'white lie' as if a new religion called Ahbash has come to Ethiopia through Mejilis and are confusing the lay Muslims. They are mobilizing the Muslim community against the government as if the government were involving in religious affairs.

For Sheikh Azam, religious extremism is the result of a, 'lack of religious knowledge' and hence Mejilis was interested to fill that 'knowledge gap' in the Muslim community through training. The above speech of the Vice President of Mejilis is almost similar to what the Prime Minister of Ethiopia Meles Zenawi had said just five days previously (17 April 2012). Some of the Prime Minister's speeches were repeated word-by-word by Mejilis leaders. The similarity of the explanations given by the two bodies shows the presence of an overlapping interest over promoting Ahbash and fear of Wahhabism. The Vice President further said that, "we [Mejilis] invited the government to teach about the constitutional provisions in the training since we believe that constitutional knowledge is important for the Muslim community to defend themselves and know their rights and duties".

Notwithstanding the official rhetoric, the above question can be answered through examining the activities of Mejilis with regard to Ahbash and investigating its letters written for the US Embassy in Addis Ababa appealing for support to fight religious extremism in Ethiopia. Starting from the mid-1990s, Mejilis leaders apparently faced stiff competition for power and legitimacy from the Salafi-oriented Muslim activists. They are criticised for corrupt practices and gross incompetency in leading the Muslim *ummah* of Ethiopia (Jemal, 2012). Young Muslim scholars and activists complain about the current Mejilis leadership of a lack of spiritual and secular knowledge to enable them to lead the Muslim community (Jemal, 2012: 74). Most of them are far less educated in both areas compared with the young, well acquainted with religious knowledge and assertive Muslims. One Muslim commentator expresses his wonder "if it is possible to find a single individual from Mejilis leaders who completed grade twelve in their secular academic career and know about their religion except reading the Quran" (*Yemuslimoch Guday*, 2012:164). Their low academic and religious profile obviously undermined their acceptance by the Muslim public in general and the young Muslim elites in particular. Those young educated Muslims are very active in Islamic *da'awa* and are well connected with the Muslim *ummah* through modern communication technologies (internet and televangelism) and satellite Islamic media such as Africa TV. They are very persuasive and appealing to the younger generation compared with the old and very passive leadership. The leadership was unable to resist the pressure from Muslim protesters chanting every Friday after *Juma'a salat* – '*Mejilis Yiwegedal, Abay Yigedebal!* – Mejilis shall be removed, Nile shall be dammed!' Being attacked as 'illegitimate' by the Muslim protesters and the religious activists, the option on the ground for the leadership was to find support and strengthen its alliance against what it calls Wahhabi extremists. The leadership repeatedly accuses its opponents as extremists and instigators of inter- and intra-religious conflicts.

In one of the confidential documents of the US Embassy in Addis Ababa (2008) entitled "*Countering Wahabi Influence in Ethiopia*" released by WIKILEAKS, it is stated that, "the Council (Mejilis) approached the Embassy officials to get support in its fight against Wahhabism"[5]. One of the strategies of the Council, as presented to the Embassy, was to

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[5] http://www.wikleaks.org/plusd/cables/09ADDISABABA1672_a.html. Last date accessed, 22 June 2014.

work for the revival of Sufi shrines in different parts of the country and encouraging Muslims to participate in the celebration of *mewlid* – as both practices are under pressure from the Wahhabi groups. The Council goes on by saying to the Embassy officials that, 'the EIASC is now all Sufi' and hence appealed to the Embassy to 'develop trust on it as a reliable partner' in the fight against Wahhabism. The Embassy in turn welcomed the decision of Mejilis and even expressed its concern for the Ethiopian government to share the fears of Mejilis to take care in the "selection of future leaders of the Council to be Sufis" (ibid).

In the final analysis, it is fair to argue that Mejilis leadership was determined 'to make both concrete and intangible business in the international game of promoting Sufism'. Though its leadership is unstable, especially due to the opposition and protests from its 'own constituencies – Muslims', some of its leaders appeared to be 'credible partners' with the sponsors of the Sufi order – particularly to the US Embassy in Addis Ababa. It successfully bought a card of loyalty to the US in order to be recognised as an important 'non-state actor' worth cooperating with to win its war against terrorism and religious extremism in East Africa (Furnish, 2013). Ahbash, siding itself with Sufism, has gained 'international credibility'. For Mejilis, therefore, aligning with Ahbash is indirectly aligning itself with the US and Ethiopian governments.

The Role of the Ethiopian Government

In the recent Muslim-government controversy over the issue of Ahbash, there was no political figure in Ethiopia that defended Ahbash as publicly as the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi did. As a reaction to strong opposition from different sectors of the Muslim community from home and Diaspora, in what they call 'forceful indoctrination of Ethiopian Muslims with an 'alien and heretical' Ahbash ideology', he, perhaps in what resembles an emotional speech, said that;

> The allegation [from the Salafis] that, 'the government brought Ahbash to Ethiopia', for me, is inappropriate. Because, first; 'Ahbash is not a foreign religion as such'. It was a Sufi belief taught by the Ethiopian Sheikh called Abdullah al-Harari in Lebanon (since he was unable to teach and preach in his own country Ethiopia). Second, Mejilis leadership brought Ahbash believing that 'it has a similar belief system with the Ethiopian Muslim population'. [Therefore], can we (as a government) stop them? Even, if Ahbash is a newcomer, can we prohibit them from coming to Ethiopia? If we can, why don't we prohibit the Salafis themselves since they are newcomers? (Meles Zenawi, 17 April 2012 – Author's translation).

The Ahbash, advertising themselves as 'beacons of religious moderation, ardent opponents of extremism and violence, supporters of separation of Islam from politics and proponents of peaceful coexistence with other religious communities'[6] appealed to many governments of the world obsessed with religious extremism, violence and terrorism. Its message is even more appropriate to Ethiopia because of its 'blood ties' with the country. One of the reasons stated above that the Prime Minister defended Ahbash was also directly related to its renowned leader Abdullah al-Harari being of Ethiopian descent. Other States might support Ahbash for its moderate stand and co-

[6] http://www.aicp.org. Last date accessed, 14 June 2012.

operational approach. In Ethiopia, another factor comes into play – his descent, of course, in addition and because of its 'tolerant values'.

Based on the views of many Muslim activists, the Ethiopian government is the most powerful actor for the coming into and dissemination of Ahbash's teaching in Ethiopia. Yuunus (2013:35) calls it as 'Ahbashism campaign' where government officials involved in the campaign on the side of Mejilis leaders. Ahmedin Jebel, a member and public relation of the Muslims' Solution Finding Committee[7], tried to elaborate signs of government intervention through promoting Ahbash. He said that:

> The role of the government begins with supporting and promoting Ahbash's ideology in its parliamentary discussion. Top government officials told us through state media that – to the extent we assume that these politicians are Sheikhs – 'Ahbash is *nebaru islimina* (indigenous Islam)'. The Ministry of Federal Affairs also participated in the promotion of Ahbash in the name of being invited by Mejilis and creating awareness (Press Release, June 2012).

The political passiveness of Ahbash, the pressures from the United States of America to de-radicalise Muslims through the encouragement of Sufism and the repeated appeal of Mejilis for countering the threats of Wahhabism might have contributed to the Ethiopian government becoming involved in the matter in different capacities. What seems even more attractive for the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) government from the teachings of Ahbash is their rhetoric for the support of the principle of secularism and the role of religion in politics. The government of Ethiopia often criticises the teachings of Salafis/Wahabbis as extremist and considers this doctrine as 'a threat to the national security and stability of the country' (*Yehaimanot*, 2011). The association of the al-Qaeda group, an internationally recognised terrorist group, with the teachings of Salafi/Wahhabi ideology often boosted the fear of the government regarding Salafism. The late Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi (17 April 2012 Parliamentary speech), once said that, "though all Salafis are not members of al-Qaeda, all al-Qaeda cells found in Ethiopia (mainly in Bale and Arsi – Oromia Region) are Salafis". The logical consequence of this accusation would be undermining the teachings of Wahhabi and its presence in the Ethiopian soil. It is also quite expected for the government to securitise Salafism and work against this group either through direct confrontation or indirectly by replacing its teaching with 'moderate versions of Islam'.

In fact, as I have indicated above, in the presence of security threats over Ethiopia mainly from neighbouring States, it would be quite reasonable for the government to fear religious radicalisation for destabilising the peace and stability of the State. Muslim-Christian conflicts are also observed in some parts of the country such as Jimma, Gondar, Wollo and Illu Ababora mainly attributed to the 'reformist' Salafi groups and fundamentalist Takfiri group (Ostebo, 2010). However, equally worrying is 'the policy designed by the government' for countering extremism and religious radicalisation. 'Religious moderation training' through the involvement of government offices certainly challenges the constitutional principle of separation of State and religion. In whatever capacity (e.g. facilitation), whether the government was invited by a religious institution (such as Mejilis) and whatever the purposes to be achieved (religious moderation and countering extremism) – acting in contravention to the constitutional principles of

[7] This was a Committee which was organised in January 2012 with 17 members to seek a solution from the government for the problems of the Muslim community related to Mejilis leadership and the Ahbash controversy.

secularism (art 11) and freedom of religion (art 27 of the 1995 FDRE Constitution) leads to regression for the respect of these principles. It also creates a strong perception among the Muslim populace that 'the government is creating an official Islam (Ahbash) intended to correct a form of Islam dubbed and distorted (Salafism/Wahhabism)'. This in turn creates a rift between different religious doctrines and aggravates sectarian conflict to threaten peace and stability which the government is sought to curb.

Muslim Protests Against Ahbash

It goes without saying that, religious freedom is guaranteed in the 1995 FDRE Constitution and there is no way for Ethiopian Muslims to oppose the teaching of a certain religious creed, dogma or doctrine. Accordingly, Ahbash as a religious sect or doctrine has the constitutional right to propagate its teaching in Ethiopia. Anyone who reads the constitutional provisions of the country (art 11 together with art 27) requires no further explanation to understand that freedom of religion and secularism are the core principles of the Ethiopian State and government. The absence of a State religion and the non-interference of State in religious affairs plus the freedom of religion and belief for everyone (particularly the freedom from coercion) are self-explanatory. The State has no 'business' in religions in so far as they undertake their activities within the legal framework of the State. No legal ground to interfere in their internal workings and doctrinal or any other differences. It cannot promote or demote a certain religion. Likewise, religious institutions and believers can undertake their own religious activities within the legal framework of the State. Believers have the right to establish institutions of religious education and administration in order to propagate and organise their religion (art 27(3)). These rights are also guaranteed by various international legal instruments such as UDHR and ICCPR which Ethiopia ratified as an integral part of its legal system (art 9(4) and art 13(2)). In this regard, it could not be the business of the State and government whether a certain religious group comes or goes as far as it fulfils legal requirements. Similarly, it should not be the business of a religious group, indigenous or exotic, to prohibit other religious group from undertaking religious activities. It is also the freedom of individuals to choose their own religion from the available religious market (home or abroad) without being coerced (art 27(1)).

Based on the constitution of Ethiopia, Ahbash, as a separate religious sect, has the right to propagate and disseminate its belief. It can organise itself using its own financial resources, institutions and worshipping places to disseminate its religious ideology. As many of the members of the Muslims' Solution Finding Committee explained in a press conference held in June 2012, the Muslim protest has nothing to do with opposing the constitutional rights of other religious groups. Yasin Nuru, one of the members of the Committee stressed that, the protest under the banner of '*Ahbash Yiwegedal*' was only meant to "remove Ahbash from our forefathers' mosques and other religious institutions, including Mejilis. It does not mean that we are demanding to expel Ahbash from Ethiopia" (Press Release, Yasin Nuru, June 2012, – Author's translation).

Adem Kamil Faris said; "Ahbash can disseminate its religious teaching as the constitution guarantees for that. No one can prevent Ahbash from doing its religious propagation. The Committee opposes only the institutions (State and religious) that force us to accept and implement Ahbash's philosophy – not Ahbash". Sultan Hajji Aman, another member of the Committee, said that; "what is not acceptable for us is the imposition of Ahbash by Mejilis and the government to change our religion" (Press Release, Sultan Hajji Aman, June 2012, – Author's translation). Tahir Abdulkadir, also

stated his views saying that; "as we have the constitutional right to teach our religion, Ahbash has also the same right. We cannot oppose it but what we opposed is the imposition" (Press Release, Tahir Abdulkadir, June 2012, – Author's translation).

From the above speeches of the members of the Muslims' Solution Finding Committee, it is understandable that Muslims could but would not demand the removal of Ahbash as a separate religious creed operating in Ethiopia since doing this is tantamount to violating the constitution of the country. Instead, what they opposed was its sponsorship by Mejilis and Ministry of Federal Affairs (MOFA) under the pretext of countering extremism and promoting religious tolerance. The Committee members collectively denied that none of their narratives, behaviour and action favours the establishment of an Islamic government in Ethiopia nor has it a 'hidden political agenda' to overthrow the government through acts of violence. They argue that, all the demands are purely religious and also constitutional with no reference to *shari'a* rule or controlling political power.

However, government's responses to the questions from Muslims are too simplistic, inaccurate and inappropriate. Many of the government policies and practices are marked by antithetic between 'bad and good, tolerant and intolerant, moderate and extremist'. By doing so, the option for promoting the practice of Sufism (supposed to be tolerant, apolitical and good) and encouraging Sufi-oriented Muslims to occupy important leadership positions in Mejilis has been 'on the table' for countering religious extremism and violence. This has resulted in the deep involvement, not to say intervention, of government in 'purely religious matters' which the principles of secularism and freedom of religion did not warrant.

Conclusion

Government and religious institutions may work together for achieving certain common purposes (e.g. delivering social services) as erecting a 'wall of separation', although this is impossible and also undesirable. However, in a time of cooperation, the government has to remain equidistant from all religions and respect the constitutional principles of freedom of religion and secularism. As discussed above, what the Ethiopian government did was neither cooperation nor equal support for all religious institutions. The government action was not equidistant but very close to some (Sufis-Ahbash) even at the exclusion of others (Salafis). It was also not cooperative in its true sense of government impartiality in the treatment of different religions in the country. The act not only damaged the credibility and legitimacy of the government in the eyes of different religious groups but also seriously undermined their constitutional rights. Obviously, acts of government of cooperating with certain religious groups supposed to be moderate at the exclusion of others would not fall in any of the spectrums of secularism to justify government measures. It is neither assertive secularism that advocates for the expulsion of all religious dogmas and practices from influencing public policies and actions nor passive secularism which advocates for government abstention from favouring or disfavouring a certain religion in any grounds. The active engagement of a government in promoting Sufism (Ahbash) certainly contradicts these two principles of secularism.

It is rather designed to create 'governmental Islam' tailored to fit the government's desire for its ultimate goal of controlling power. By doing so, the government is trying to combat the involvement of 'extremist Islamic groups' in politics by creating its own

version of Islam through nationalisation of Ahbash. The ultimate goal is to change a certain religious dogma by supporting its favourites by making religion an instrument for securing public support. Despite all the efforts of the government to install its favourite 'apolitical and tolerant Islam' in Ethiopia, the fact that Ahbash was invited through Mejilis, which itself failed to win the hearts and minds of Ethiopian Muslims, undermined its success. Hence, I conclude that, State favouritism towards Ahbash as a 'counter-extremism strategy' in Ethiopia is a failure with its backlash effect on the government and Mejilis leadership. The protest, at least in the open, now ceased and the situation seems calm but many are still aggrieved with the decision of the government and the Mejilis leadership with a long-term damaging effect of Muslim support for the government and the peace and stability of the State.

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