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Media and religion in Ethiopia

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A research report

By Mulatu Alemayehu Moges and Terje Skjerdal

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Cover photo: The renovated Meskel Square in Addis Ababa. The religious 'ownership' to Meskel Square has been subject to much debate lately and is one of the cases discussed in this report. (Photo by Terje Skjerdal)

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Acronyms

AMC	Amhara Media Corporation, also known as AMECO (formerly Amhara Mass Media Agency, AMMA)
AMN	Addis Media Network
CARD	Center for Advancement of Rights and Democracy
EBA	Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority (now EMA)
EBC	Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation
EBS	Ethiopian Broadcasting Service
EECMY	Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus
EMA	Ethiopian Media Authority
ENDF	Ethiopian National Defence Force
EOTC	Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
ESAT	Ethiopian Satellite Radio and Television
ETB	Ethiopian Birr
ETV	Ethiopian Television (part of EBC)
FBC	Fana Broadcasting Corporation
IRCE	Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia
IRD-E	Inter-religious Dialogue of Ethiopia
LWF	Lutheran World Federation
OBN	Oromia Broadcasting Network
OLF	Oromo Liberation Front
PP	Prosperity Party
RVOG	Radio Voice of the Gospel
SNNPR	Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region
SRTA	South Radio and Television Agency (sometimes called SNNP Mass Media Agency)
TDF	Tigray Defence Forces
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front
YD	Yemisirach Dimts
YDCS	Yemisirach Dimts Communication Services

Executive summary

Religion has become an issue in the Ethiopian media. This is a new situation in a country which for many years excluded religious expressions from the public media. With the coming of prime minister Abiy Ahmed and the Prosperity Party in 2018, the principle of the secular state, which is in the Ethiopian Constitution, has been challenged fundamentally. Religion is being brought into official speeches and reflected in the media. Presenters on state television are seen wearing Orthodox crosses and Muslim hijabs, which was unheard of just five years ago. The new media proclamation which came in 2021 allows religious organizations to apply for broadcasting licences for the first time in the nation's history. By 2023, between 40 and 50 religious organizations have acquired such a licence. At the same time, religion has also surfaced as a conflict issue in the media. Quarrel within the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council in 2021, dispute around the ownership and use of Meskel Square in Addis Ababa in 2020–22, and an attempt of schism within the Orthodox church in 2023 are three hot issues which epitomize religious conflict as a topic in the current news scene.

The purpose of this study is to assess the ongoing changes in media and religion in Ethiopia. The researchers have interviewed 20 representatives from the media, the religious community and the regulator. The study also contains an in-depth analysis of 98 stories on religion which made headlines in ten different media outlets between 2020 and 2023.

The study found that the newfound openness for religion in the Ethiopian media is deficient. The 'broadcasting licences' for religious organizations do not permit local radio stations or transmission through terrestrial television but are a registration system to map organizations which use the Internet and satellite to distribute religious programmes to Ethiopian audiences. The authorities continue to be suspicious of religious broadcasting and fear that extreme actors will destabilize the social order if they get access to the airwaves. The state media – officially called public media – neglect and downplay religious conflict issues in their coverage. However, with the many private media outlets as well as the social media on the scene, it has become harder for the state media to control the narrative around religious issues altogether.

The content analysis shows that polarization is still a major problem in the reporting of religion in the Ethiopian media. Stories are often biased towards the journalist's political and ethnic stance. Claiming that they are 'secular', the state media ('public media') tend to ignore important religious issues and conflicts which have resulted in loss of lives, burning of religious buildings, and displacement of people. The media appear to be ambivalent between applying a peculiar interpretation of 'secular' principles by ignoring religion, or deciding to report such issues. The report stresses the importance of sensitizing reporters about religious issues and making the media more ethically responsible when reporting religion.

Introduction and method

To dig deeper into the issue of media and religion in Ethiopia, the study uses a combination of four different methods: interviews, content analysis, textual analysis and document analysis.

The recent political and structural shifts in Ethiopia have brought changes that affect the media environment in the country. One of the results of the reform is liberalized media legislation. The accountability of the public media executive and the board of Ethiopian Media Authority (EMA)[1] now rests with the Hou-

Religion is deeply integrated with Ethiopian culture and history. (Photo by Terje Skjerdal)

1 The appointment of the new board members has in fact violated the newly endorsed media law, specifically article 9 that describes the process of appointments to the board. While the law stipulates

se of People Representatives. Promising changes have also occurred in the media market. The number of broadcasting outlets has increased. Close to 120 television and radio channels are active. In addition, more than 30 community broadcasters are in operation in different parts of the country (mostly radio). While the content diversity is still limited, the language diversity has significantly improved with close to 70 languages being used in national and regional broadcasting media and 30 in community broadcasters (Mulatu, 2022). Newspapers are not progressing that well. They decrease both in number and circulation.

There are also persisting challenges. One is the way the media report sensitive and critical issues. A previous study carried out by the authors of this report indicates that the Ethiopian media have become ethnically polarized (Skjerdal and Mulatu, 2021). Journalists report conflict and political issues through their ethnic lens. They tend to either annihilate or report the stories through an 'othering' frame. They exercise what could be called 'floating professionalism' (Skjerdal and Mulatu, 2021, p. 33).

Religion is another area which is subject to tension. Arguably, conflict narratives have increased lately (Østebø, 2023). Tensions come to the fore during religious festivals, and a number of churches and some mosques have been burnt down. This is, in brief, the backdrop of the current report. The study is conducted to examine the current trends of journalistic practice in relation to religion. Specifically, the study attempts to answer these research questions:

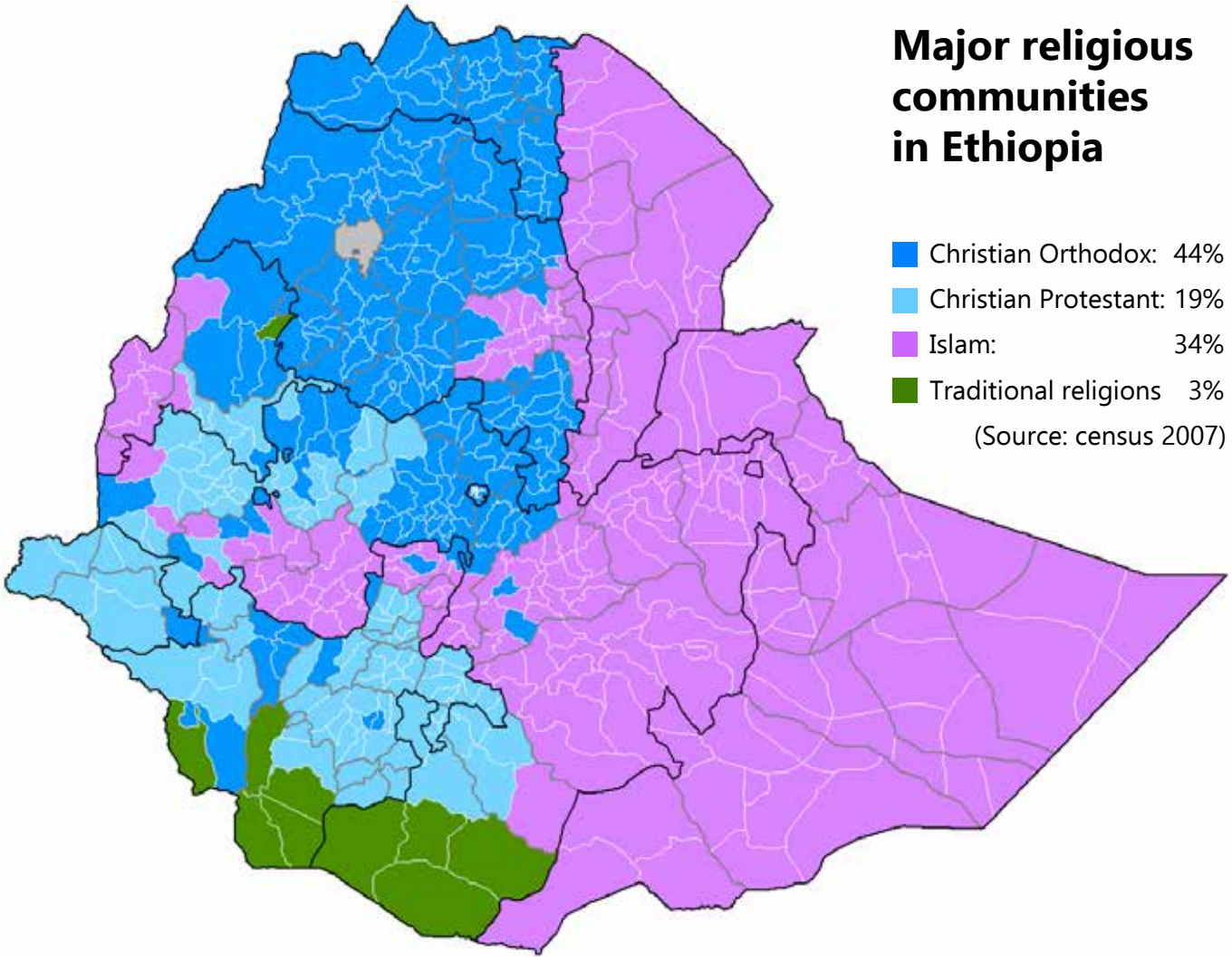
that board members of the EMA shall be free from political pressures, members of the ruling party are included on the board. Also, the process of appointment was not transparent to the public.

Interviews

1. Daniel Seifemichael ..... Orthodox TV, former director
2. Abba Petros Berga ..... Pax Catholic TV, founder
3. Sister Tigist Getachew Abebe ..... Pax Catholic TV, staff
4. Wakshuma Terefe ..... Yemisirach Dimts Radio, manager
5. Tamrat Tadele ..... Yemisirach Dimts Radio, former producer
6. Abdulmenan Menza Adem ..... Africa TV, executive manager
7. Nurselam Hassen..... Africa TV, admin and finance manager
8. Sheikh Mohammedzain Zahradin.... Al-Aqsa mosque, imam
9. Jemal Ahmed ..... Jeilu Media, director
10. Abel Adamu ..... Fana Broadcasting Corporate, content cluster deputy CEO
11. Ametrehman Jemal ..... Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation, presenter
12. Tsehay Aklilu Biressaw..... Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation, content advisor/editor
13. Amare Aregawi ..... The Reporter, owner
14. Negussie Teffera ..... Population Media Center, founder
15. Yonatan Tesfaye..... Ethiopian Media Authority, deputy director general
16. Solomon Goshu..... Media Law Working Group, legal advisor
17. Messaud Adem ..... Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia, deputy secretary general

Plus three unnamed informants from Ethiopian Satellite Television (ESAT) and Ethiopian Broadcasting Service (EBS).

The interviews were conducted in Addis Ababa between December 2022 and October 2023.



- What does the historical narrative of religion and the government in Ethiopia look like, and what does it infer to the current media and political environment?
- How do Ethiopian media policy, legislation and editorial policies address religious issues?
- What characterizes the religious media landscape in the country?
- How do the media deal with religious matters?
- How do media practitioners see their roles in dealing with religious issues in the current political context?

The study applied four methods to collect and analyse data. The first one is key informant interviews. The researchers interviewed 20 representatives of the media, religious community and regulator between December 2022 and October 2023. The persons interviewed are not meant to be representative of the composition of different religious communities in the country, but are selected because each of them contributes to shedding light on different aspects of the research topic. Much of the information in the report come from these sources, but they are kept anonymous in the report and sensitive information is therefore not attributed to a source.

The second method is content analysis. The television stations Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC), Amhara Media Corporation (AMC), Addis Media Network (AMN), Oromia Broadcasting Network (OBN) and Debube TV/South Radio and Television Agency (SRTA) from the state/public media, and Fana Broadcasting Corporate (FBC), Walta

Media and Communication Corporate, Ethiopian Broadcasting Service (EBS), Ethiopian Satellite Radio and Television (ESAT) and Nahoo TV from the commercial media were included for the quantitative content analysis. For the content anlysis, key cases which have been looked at are:

- Government plans for the renovation of Meskel Square in 2020/21
- Eid celebration at Meskel Square in 2021
- Thanksgiving celebration by Protestants at Meskel Square in 2021
- Muslim killings in Gonder in 2021 and subsequent attacks on Orthodox Christians and burning of churches in the SNNP-Selite area
- The burning of seven Protestant churches by Muslims in Halaba Kulito in the SNNP region in 2019
- The change of leadership in the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council when Salafist Hajji Ibrahim Tufa replaced Sufi Hajji Mufti Omer Idris in 2022.
- The burning of four mosques and one church in Mota town, Amhara region in 2019
- The disagreement (attempted 'schism') within the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church in 2023

The third method is textual analysis. A limited number of stories concerning the recent conflict within EOTC was purposively selected from two private channels, ESAT and Prime Media, for closer analysis (Prime Media was included only in the textual analysis, not in the preceding content analysis). The two private channels were purposively selected based on their nature (they are both private; they are stationed in the capital; and they paid much attention to the case from the beginning to the end). The textual analysis – qualitative in nature – looked at how the stories were reported, what tone, frame, and intention were applied, and how the problem, the cause, and aggravating factors of the problem were presented.

The fourth and last method is document analysis. Historical, legal, and policy documents were reviewed. The editorial policy of three media ownership types (one from the federal government media – EBC; one private – FBC; and one from the regional media – Debube TV) was assessed to show how different media outlets approach religious issues from a principal level.

Personal observations and informal discussions with journalists have been used to illuminate the research findings and strengthen the analysis.

We believe that this study will contribute to understand current trends in how religion is framed and reported in the Ethiopian media. The study can possibly inspire media developers and journalism associations to facilitate training workshops to discuss how to report religion. The study can also be of use for academics who examine emerging trends in the Ethiopian media, where recent political tensions have shifted from party politics towards ethnic and religious identity politics. And finally, like the 2021 media and ethnicity study (Skjerdal and Mulatu, 2021), this study can be used as a basis for dialogue meetings between different stakeholders to foster greater understanding of the subject media, religion and politics.

1. A brief history of media and religion in Ethiopia

By Terje Skjerdal

This chapter reviews the relationship between media and religion in Ethiopia in historial perspective and discusses the differences in policy between the Ethiopian empire, the Derg regime, the EPRDF, and the PP.

The media during the Ethiopian empire (i.e. until 1974) reflected a situation where the Orthodox church and the state were two sides of the same coin (Gebru, 2015b, p. 6; Meseret, 2013, p. 91 and 175). Religious content in the state media was limited to the voice of the Orthodox church, promoting festivals and events that took place within the church. A few church-owned publications did exist, including Zena Bete Kristyan ('News of the Churches'), Nuro Bezeday ('Living Wisely') and Tekle Haimanot ('Saint Tekle Haimanot'), all three of which were launched in 1947, marking the beginning of a period of increased tolerance for press publications in Ethiopia (Adugnaw 2019). Freedom of religion was recognized for the first time in the 1955 revised constitution, but it did not have much practical consequences in terms of fair representation of religion in the official media.

One notable exception of the Orthodox dominance, though, was the establishment of the Protestant station Radio Voice of the Gospel (RVOG) in 1963. From its headquarters in Addis Ababa the station transmitted Christian programmes in 14 different languages throughout Africa and Asia. The station was owned by the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and was locally affiliated with the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY). The Orthodox church and the patriarch were against the establishment of RVOG on Ethiopian soil. However, emperor Haile Selassie reprimanded the Orthodox church for being shortsighted and granted the station licence. It was the emperor himself who gave the inauguration speech when RVOG went on air on February 26, 1963 (Tamrat, 2008, p. 30). In

Emperor Haile Selassie visiting Radio Voice of the Gospel in 1963. (Photo: LWF archives)

the final programme schedule, however, the Orthodox church was granted half an hour broadcast time daily without charge (Van Deusen, 1968, p. 114). The license given to RVOG stated that the station was not allowed to broadcast any attack on the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (Tamrat, 2008, p. 39). One of the reasons for LWF to choose Addis Ababa as the site of transmission for its new international radio service was that Ethiopia seemed more stable than other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (Gebru, 2015b, p. 7). Apart from a few church-owned publications, RVOG remained the only religious media outlet in Ethiopia during the imperial years.

The Marxist Derg regime (1974–91) had suppressive policies against religious activity and went to the extent of executing church leaders, including Abune Theophilos, the patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC), in 1979. No religious media outlets were allowed in that period (Adugnaw, 2019, p. 183). Those which already existed were forced to close or were 'nationalized'. A case in point is RVOG, which was nationalized on 12 March 1977 in a dramatic incident where troops were sent to the station early in the morning to confiscate the radio buildings and all the production equipment. Twelve hours later, Radio Voice of the Gospel had become Radio Voice of Revolutionary Ethiopia and was since a propaganda channel for the Derg (Tamrat, 2008, p. 42).

Apart from a few church-owned publications, Radio Voice of the Gospel remained the only religious media outlet in Ethiopia during the imperial years.

Between 1991 and 2018

The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary

Democratic Front (EPRDF) promised a free media environment when the insurgence group seized power in May 1991. Among the many independent publications that came on the market in the next coming years were also religious outlets. The early 1990s saw a rise of an Islamic press in Ethiopia, for the first time in the country (Hussein, 1998). The Islamic newspapers became an important identification marker for the Muslim community. To some extent, the Islamic press did not only cover religious topics, but also economic, social and political issues (Hussein, 1994, p. 792). However, newspapers and magazines published by religious institutions were not allowed to have a strong news and current affairs orientation. They needed to primarily cover religious content in order to be accepted by the authorities.

At least eight newspapers and magazines were published by various religious institutions in the 1990s (Bisrat, 2015). The number grew in the following years. By 2002, a total number of 235 print publications were registered by the Ministry of Information (although many were not in actual circulation), of which 14 were owned by religious organizations (Gebru, 2015a). By comparison, only seven publications belonged to political organizations.

During the 27 years of EPRDF, Ethiopian state television framed religious differences as inherently conflictious.

The relative diversity of religious content in the independent print media industry was not reflected in the official media. To the contrary, the state media followed the principles of the secular state policy as laid down in the 1995 constitution: "The state shall not interfere in religious matters and religion shall not interfere in state affairs" (article 11(3)). From a European perspective, the idea of the secular state is derived from a secularist interpretation of Enlightenment thought, where the state aims to remain 'neutral' in a religiously diverse society (Abbink, 2014). However, the application of the principle in Ethiopian governance is better understood as a continuation of the Marxist anti-religious state policy introduced by the Derg in 1974. The socialist ideology saw religion as an impediment to modern thinking in the same way as traditional practices were regarded as backward and a hindrance for development (Adugnaw, 2019, p. 183). EPRDF, like its predecessor the Derg, governed on a centralized state model (despite its ethnic federalism policy), which implied high state involvement in all public sectors. As such, the prime intention of the secular state policy was actually not to keep the government out of religious affairs and to secure worldview diversity, but rather to serve as a control mechanism vis-à-vis religious groups. In particular, the Islam revivalist movement which grew in the 1990s was regarded as a threat to national security and therefore attempted to be controlled (Abbink, 2014). In the official media this meant ignoring or annihilating the movement from coverage in the 1990s and 2000s. Later on, a more proactive strategy was enforced to discredit Muslim revivalism. In January 2013, Ethiopian Television (ETV) broadcast the critical documentary 'Jihadawi Harakat' which portrayed the Muslim movement as radical and dangerous for the nation (Henok, 2013). The documentary was biased and presented muddled evidence of Islam extremism (Abbink, 2014, p. 356).

During the 27 years of EPRDF, Ethiopian state television framed religious differences as inherently conflictious. As the main rule, religious affairs were not an issue in the state media. Religion did not make headlines in news and current affairs programmes. Programmes showing religious practice, for example church services, also did not have a place on the state broadcaster. The exception was religious festivals, which were regularly covered, but always within a cultural frame and predominantly focusing on Christian Orthodox events. Relations between EOTC and the state

soared during EPRDF, however, and the state media were no longer a patron of Orthodox identity in the same way as they were during the empire. Journalists practiced self-censorship when covering religion and were also afraid to favour Orthodox Christianity above other faiths (Nebiyu, 2008, p. 26). Religion was not only neglected by the state broadcaster, but in newspapers as well – both in private and state-owned outlets (Sileshie, 2018).

However, sections of the private media showed an interest in religious coverage, much to the dismay of the government. During the protests against government interference in Islamic affairs between 2011 and 2014, a number of incidents occurred where faith-affiliated outlets and their journalists were targeted. The offices of different Muslim publications were raided; copies of Muslim newspapers were seized; Muslim journalists were abducted; Muslim editors were charged with terrorism; et cetera. In July 2012, 30,000 copies of Fitih were confiscated after the outlet had reported on hostilities between Muslim activists, which eventually led to the closing of the outlet (IREX, 2012). Indeed, many of the arrests which occurred in the Ethiopian media between 2010 and 2018 involved Muslim journalists.

Ban on religious broadcasting

Even if the 1992 press law opened up for publications by religious institutions, religious broadcasting was prohibited during the entire reign of EPRDF (1991 to 2018). When the government finally opened up for private radio stations in 2007, the law specifically forbade licences being awarded to religious organizations – alongside political organizations (2007 Broadcasting proclamation, clause 23(4)). The decision to prohibit religious broadcasting licences went against the media policy of most other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, where religious broadcasters and spritiual programmes make up a significant part of the media scene.

The reason behind the ban in Ethiopia was the potential risk of friction between religious groups, which the government regarded as a real danger. The public relations officer of the Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority (EBA) defended the restriction on religious broadcasting by referring to the safety of the nation. According to EBA, the potential negative impact of the broadcast media is high, illustrated by the detrimental use of radio broadcasts during the 1994 Rwanda genocide (Gebru, 2015b, p. 10). Interestingly, the PR officer of the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council defended the restrictive legislation by using the same rationale: "Even if we are all Ethiopians, it is very dangerous. We can think of the Rwanda case" (Gebru, 2015b, p. 12). Other representatives of the religious community, probably most, were critical of the ban. Deacon Daniel Kibret, a custodian of EOTC's media strategy in various positions for a number of years, strongly opposed the ban and denied that religious broadcasting would lead to more escalation of conflict in the country (Gebru, 2015b, p. 10).

What was prohibited, however, was religious broadcasters on Ethiopian soil, while production of religious content was legal. This opening was exploited by several organizations which produced programmes locally and broadcast them from abroad. One case was EECMY, which had been involved in Radio Voice of the Gospel during the empire years. In 1992, the church opened a communication wing called Yemisirach Dimts Communication Services (YDCS) which produced books and cassettes for its members. In 2008, YDCS started Radio Selam, a peace radio project aimed at Ethiopian audiences. Since the station could not apply for a licence, the programmes were recorded on CD-ROM and sent to South Africa where they were transmitted by the Christian me-

In comparison with other religious communities, the Orthodox church dominated the coverage in the media during the EPRDF years

Many of the arrests which occurred in the Ethiopian media between 2010 and 2018 involved Muslim journalists.

The programmes of Radio Selam were recorded at the studios of Yemisirach Dimts at Mekanissa before being shipped to South Africa.

dia network Trans World Radio back into Ethiopia on shortwave. The process was demanding and programmes had to be recorded and carried to South Africa 2–3 months in advance. To ease the process, YDCS applied for permission to own a satellite transmitter which could send the programmes to South African quicker, but the application was rejected by the government (Olsen, 2009, p. 103). The same government had turned down a request by EECMY to return the broadcasting equipment of Radio Voice of the Gospel when EPRDF shut down Radio Voice of Revolutionary Ethiopia for good in May 1991 and converted it into Radio Ethiopia. For the antenna and several production buildings EECMY were compensated USD 600,000 which supposedly represented less than ten percent of its real value (Olsen, 2009, p. 87).

Generally speaking, EPRDF was not supportive of religious broadcasting.

Generally speaking, EPRDF was not supportive of religious broadcasting. In the words of the previously quoted EBA PR officer, "the Ethiopian government has not seen any contribution of religious broadcasting for the development of the country. The present Ethiopian government is committed to its development goal, but religious organizations cannot do that" (Tamrat, 2008, p. 58). Radio Selam, however, had a strong development profile as reflected in its schedule which had 60% social programmes, while 40% was spiritual, comparable with RVOG's 70/30 policy in the past (Olsen, 2009, p. 67). When producing the programmes, YDCS knew that they dare not challenge government policy, even if the content was broadcast from abroad and as such was not under Ethiopian jurisdiction. The station practiced self-censorship. Radio Selam was particularly careful about content which could plant suspicion within the government of support to the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). Since EECMY has always had a stronghold in the Oromia region and a part of the church was associated with Oromo nationalism, the EPRDF government was constantly attentive to media activity which could be read as support of OLF, then a designated terrorist organization. Radio Selam's producer, Wakshuma Terefe, was called

for meetings with security officials over a two-month period for 'discussions' in relation to the OLF question. According to the producer, "the government would be happy to get rid of [Radio Selam]" (Olsen, 2009, p. 102).

The transmission of Radio Selam programmes ceased already in 2009, a year after its opening, though not as a result of government pressure, but because the funding provided by an American donor, the National Endowment of Democracy (NED), ended.

The conflict dimension in religious reporting

Research confirms that religious issues, especially religious conflict, were a neglected issue by the state media during EPRDF. According to a study on media coverage of internal conflict, the state-run newspaper The Ethiopian Herald addressed religious tensions in only 21 stories in an 8-year period from 2005 to 2013 (Mulatu, 2017a). This despite the fact that the period saw a series of clashes between Muslims and Christians in various towns throughout the country, in addition to the escalation of Muslim protests towards the end of the studied period. The researcher makes the point that many of the clashes happened in areas near to where journalists were placed, yet the incidents were not reported (Mulatu, 2017a, p. 120). The Ethiopian Herald thus made an active choice not to report on religious violence, much like the negligence of such issues by the state broadcaster.

There is some evidence that the regional state media were more willing to cover religious tension than the federal state media, however. One example is a speech held by Abune Abraham, a prominent Orthodox church leader, on the eve of the Meskel festival in Bahir Dar on September 26, 2015. The senior clerk condemned the authorities for using violence against demonstrators during the ongoing protests. The important speech was broadcast by Amhara Media Corporation, i.e. the regionally owned television company, but ignored by federal state television (Behailu, 2022). The broadcasting of the speech does not only have religious significance, but could be seen as a regional response to the way federal authorities were handling critical voices at the time.

In contrast to the practice of the nation's mainstream media, the social media would appear as an arena where religious tensions easily come to the fore. However, interestingly, a large study of online comments before and after the 2015 parliamentary elections found that discussion about religion was less antagonistic than other types of topics. The study entitled 'Mechachal' scrutnized 13,000 statements on Facebook and found that only 10.5% of the comments related to religion contained attacks in some form (Gagliardone, 2016, p. 44). None of the statements was defined as 'dangerous', in contrast to statements uttered in relation to politics or ethnicity. A few statements were found to contain offensive utterances and hate speech, but less than those related to ethnicity. Among the offensive statements against religious groups, most were targeting Protestant Christians. Nevertheless, the study concluded that overall, "religion, as discussed in social media among Ethiopians, appears to serve as a unifying, rather than a divisive factor" (Gagliardone, 2016, p. 10).

A study of online comments before and after the 2015 parliamentary elections found that discussion about religion was less antagonistic than other types of topics.

In summing up the treatment of religion during EPRDF (1991 to 2018), religious affairs were on the agenda for parts of the independent media, but largely neglected by the state media. Seeing religion as a potential source of conflict rather than a unifying factor, the state made it difficult to cover religion and prohibited religious broadcasting. The potential conflict dimension of religion is echoed in the code of ethics of the Ethiopian Media Council, which maintains that religious reporting ought to focus

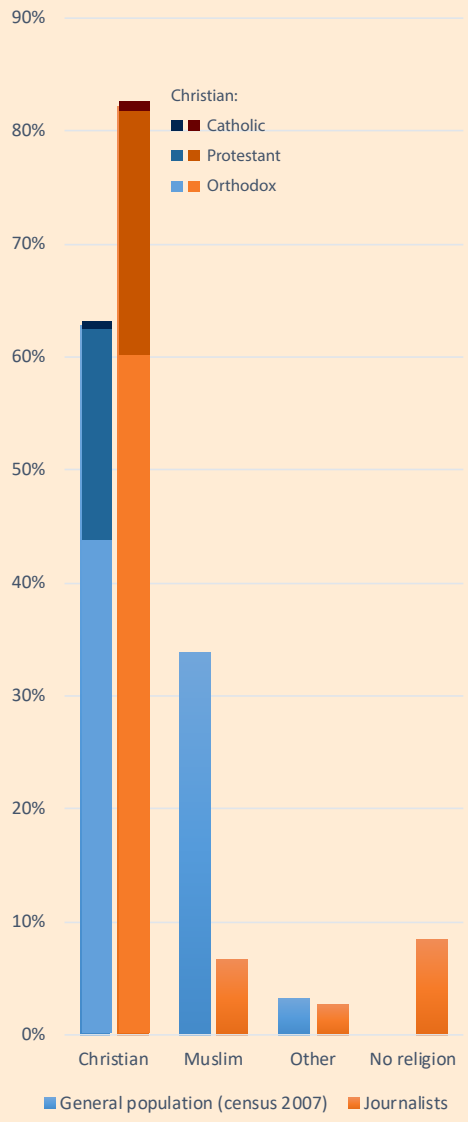
on "the solution of the relations, friendship and peace of the people" (clause 6(3) – formulated around 2016, before EMC was officially launched). As regards the social media, religious hate speech was found to be less predominant than political and ethnic hate speech (Gagliardone, 2016).

The journalists' religious views

Islam is under-represented in the newsroom, with 6.8% of the journalists regarding themselves as Muslim.

Studies of journalists' religious view in Ethiopia are few, but a survey conducted by the Worlds of Journalism Study between 2013 and 2015 provides valuable data. Among the 350 journalists surveyed – representing 27 media outlets – 82.1% subscribed to a Christian denomination, either Orthodox, Protestant or Catholic (figure 1). The percentage is clearly higher than the overall percentage of Christians in the country, which is 62.8% according to the 2007 census. Orthodox Christianity is especially over-represented, as 59.8% of the journalists were found to be Orthodox, compared with 43.5% of the general population. 20.6% reported that they were Protestant, and 1.7% Catholic. Islam is under-represented in the newsroom, with 6.8% of the journalists in the survey regarding themselves as Muslim, compared with 33.9% of the general population. Interestingly, 8.4% of the journalists informed that they did not follow any religion, while less than 2% of Ethiopians overall regard themselves as un-religious.

Figure 1: Different faiths, general population vs. journalists



Source: Worlds of Journalism Study (Skjerdal, 2017)

The Worlds of Journalism Study also confirms that religion is more important to Ethiopian journalists than to journalists elsewhere in the world. 51.7% of Ethiopian reporters and editors say religion is 'very' or 'extremely' important to them, compared with 33.2% of the respondents in the other 66 participating countries in the survey (Skjerdal, 2017, p. 13).

Openness for religion since 2018

When Dr. Abiy Ahmed took over as the nation's leader in April 2018, religion became reinvigorated on the public arena. For the first time, Ethiopia had a prime minister who openly expressed religious views and who concluded his speeches by calling for God's blessing over the country. Abiy's own affiliation is with the Pentecostal church, and his cabinet soon came to be associated with an Evangelical agenda which arguably reflects 'pente politics' (Haustein and Dereje, 2022) – with a view to 'pentecostalize' the government administration (Lefort, 2020).

Programme hosts on EBC are seen wearing crosses and other religious symbols, which was unthinkable just a few years ago. (Screenshot from ETV October 2023)

The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethopia nevertheless remains a secular state according to the constitution of 1995, but the secular state principle is no longer seen by the nation's leadership as a formal restriction for expression of religious commitment involving the state.

The newfound openness for religious expressions in the public sphere was first seen in independent media outlets. Several diaspora satellite channels had a tradition for religious content, and they were not afraid to continue broadcasting the programmes after they moved their production back to the homeland in 2018 when they observed the new official line on religion. One of the popular channels was Ethiopian Broadcasting Service (EBS), which started as a satellite channel in 2008 broadcasting from the US. Different religious organizations rented airtime on EBS and continued to rent airtime after the station moved back to the homeland upon getting a local broadcasting licence in 2018. However, church organizations wanted to have their own media services and the question of licences for religious brodcasters became an issue when the consultations towards a new media law started in 2018. The outcome of the process was that the new 2021 media proclamation for the first time in the country's history gave religious organizations the right to apply for television broadcasting licences, though not for radio. The reason given for the continued ban on religious radio stations is that the radio spectrum is limited and the government wants to reserve the airwaves for programme content with broader public appeal (Yonatan Tesfaye, EMA deputy director, personal interview 12 Dec 2022). Religious television broadcasting, on the other hand, is allowed, but the terrestrial television network is not made available for this purpose and the owner of the channel must secure their own transmission, which is usually done through rented space on NileSat or EthioSat.

Religion also became visible in the state media to a larger degree than before. Viewers could for the first time see reporters and anchors wearing religious symbols on the main Amharic programmes on Ethiopian state television. Some news anchors began to appear with an Orthodox cross around their neck, while others were wearing a simple black leather string, which to all Ethiopians would

Religion became visible in the state media to a larger degree than before.

Ametrehman Jemal – the first person to wear hijab on EBC's main channel. (Photo by Terje Skjerdal)

signal belonging to the Orthodox faith.

Even more surprising was one morning in 2020 when one of the presenters in the daily current affairs show 'Dagu' on EBC's main channel appeared with a hijab around her head. The presenter was Ametrehman Jemal, a then 32-year old Muslim woman who had worked for EBC for 11 years. For her, it was not primarily a religious statement to wear the hijab on EBC, but a desire to let national television reflect the diversity of the nation. "A television station has to look like its people," Ametrehman says (personal interview, 10 March 2023). The programme presenter opposed her boss, who did not want her to use religious attire on the morning show. Prior to the occasion, presenters in other programmes on ETV had been using Orthodox symbols, which to Ametrehman meant that Muslim symbols should also be allowed.

After Ametrehamn started to wear hijab on the main Amharic programme, a few others have begun to use it too, including a presenter who frequently appears with Muslim attire in a children's programme. It should be mentioned that hijab has been common in Somali and Afar programmes on EBC since the very beginning of distinct language broadcasts many years ago, but these programmes are of a different kind as they reach an audience group which is believed to be close to 100% Muslim. That practice has never been controversial, but it is a different issue with the Amharic section which has a mandate to foster national cohesion and unify the people.

Like a divine coincidence, the Covid-19 pandemic hit Ethiopia at a moment when the state media seemed to begin to tolerate religious expressions.

The Covid-19 miracle on EBC

Like a divine coincidence, the Covid-19 pandemic hit Ethiopia at a moment when the state media seemed to begin to tolerate religious expressions. The state media came out as a timely redeemer when the lockdown was put into force in April 2020. The ban on social gatherings was detrimental for the religiously active Ethiopian population, but television broadcasts could relief the situation. In unprecedented manner, EBC opened up its programme schedule for religious services, a full hour every evening between 8 and 9 PM. The content was produced on an alternating basis between four religious groups, affiliated with Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant and Muslim congregations (the Protestants were represented by different churches). Several other television stations broadcast the same programmes, including the state-affiliated channel Fana Broadcasting Corporate (officially 'commercial') and the independent entertainment channel Arts TV.

Thanks to the Covid-19 pandemic, Ethiopian Television began to broadcast religious services in April 2020. The broadcasts went on for several months during the lockdown. (Screenshot from ETV 8 April 2020)

The programmes only lasted for about two months, but at that point they had already made a lasting change in the state media's treatment of religion. Religion was no longer an area only to be covered distantly within a cultural frame, but a topic which could also involve transmission of religious practice. As suggested by one of the informants in this study, the Covid-19 incidence created public acceptance for religious broadcasting. The formerly strict policy against showing religious practice in the official media had eroded.

The treatment of religious conflict in the media

The openness vis-à-vis religion since 2018 does not imply that all religious issues are subject to media coverage. Religious conflict is still largely a no-go area for the government-affiliated media channels. When a conflict broke out in the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council in 2021, the issue did not reach the headlines in the state media. The state media and affiliated institutions were instructed directly by the Prime Minister's Office not to cover the issue since it was seen as potentially destabilizing for the country. The same policy was applied when the Meskel Square dispute arose in 2021, and when three bishops within EOTC tried to establish an Oromia Region Synod in 2023 (see chapters 2 and 4 of this report). As with any other potentially sensitive topic, the state-affiliated media are cautious in their coverage of religious conflict, often resulting in negligence of the issue altogether.

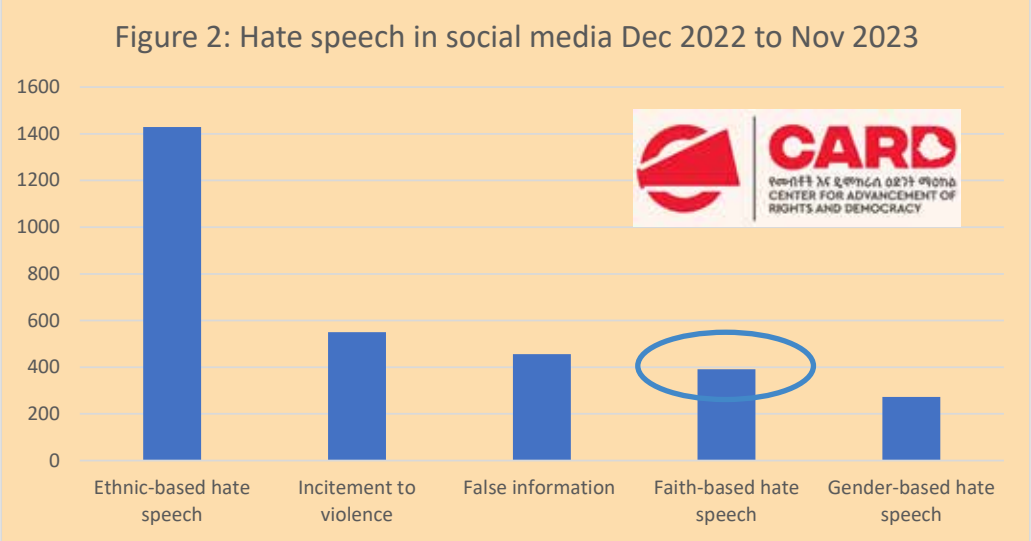
Regardless of the lack of coverage by the official media, the general public is well aware of the ongoing controversies through the private media and the social media. The escalation of religious conflict in Ethiopia is not least reflected in the online debate, where religion has become a hot issue since 2021. The tendency was rather different in the first few years after Abiy Ahmed came to power. A study of the social media sites of three strong independent media outlets with different affiliations – Oromia Media Network (Oromo), Asrat (Amhara) and Dimtse Weyane Television (Tigray) – found few cases of offensive speech related to religion in the two-year period from April 2018 to July 2020. Among approximately 2,800 user comments which contained hate speech, only 71 (2.5%) concerned religion. Most of the hate speech were either politically motivated or ethnically-based (Muluken, Mulatu and Biset, 2023). The tendency has clearly changed after 2021, when there has both been a radical increase in coverage of

The Covid-19 incidence created public acceptance for religious broadcasting.

Religious conflict is still largely a no-go area for the government-affiliated media channels.

stories concerning religion in the independent media and an upsurge of conflict-oriented debate surrounding religion in the social media. According to the Center for Advancement of Rights and Democracy (CARD) which monitors social media channels in Ethiopia, religious hate speech peaked drastically during the EOTC conflict in January and February 2023. In February 2023 alone, CARD recorded 153 cases of hate speech related to religion, which is 2–3 times as much as the amount of ethnically-motivated hate speech in a typical month. Usually, ethnically-motivated hate speech will outdo religiously-motivated hate speech by far, but since 2022 the proportion of religious hate speech has increased in relation to other types of hate speech.

The overall statistics, however, show that ethnic hate speech in the social media outshines religious hate speech by far. In the one-year period from December 2022 to November 2023, CARD reported 1429 cases of ethnic-based hate speech compared with 391 cases of faith-based hate speech (figure 2). This indicates that even if there may have been growing religious tension and debate in later years, the tension related to ethnicity is far more prevalent.



Source: Center for Advancement of Rights and Democracy (CARD)

2. Religion and media policy in Ethiopia

By Mulatu Alemayehu Moges

As noted in the previous chapter, despite Ethiopia's constitutional avowals of a secular state, religion remains salient in almost all aspects of public life in the country. Religion plays a pivotal role in the social and cultural construction of the country.

In addition, religion plays a positive role in peace-building and reconciliation. Prior to the Tigray war, religious leaders together with prominent people and elders went to Mekele to resolve the difference between TPLF and the federal government, though their attempt was unsuccessful[2]. Another delegation from the Inter-Religious Council went to Mekele after the end of the mission of law enforcement in February 2021[3]. On the contrary, religion is one case of conflict in the country. These days, religious tension and conflicts related to religion are widely observed in Ethiopia. Sermons become the centre for sending negative messages and animosity to the perceived others. Religious events also become the factor for violence and tension. Media laws and policies as well as ethics become vital in guiding journalists on how to cover the issues. This part of the study will, first, explore relevant media legislation and policies regarding religion and faith-based media. Second, it will assess the impact of the policies in media reports.

As part of the overhaul of repressive laws concerning democratic institutions, the justice system, and the media, the new government organized an independent advisory body – the Legal and Justice Affairs Advisory Council (LJAAC) in mid-2018. Proposing reforms on laws regulating civil society, media, freedom of information, and the anti-ter-

2 https://borkena.com/2020/06/15/ethiopia-elders-intervene-to-mediate-abiy-govt-de-facto-state-in-the-north/

3 https://eritreahub.org/religious-elders-arrive-in-mekelle-but-to-what-kind-of-welcome

rorism proclamation were among the mandates of the advisory council. Thus, the Ethiopian parliament passed Media Proclamation No. 1238/2021 "to fully enforce the right to freedom of expression and citizens' freedom of the media" (FDRE, 2021), which was stifled by the EPRDF government. The proclamation is praised for being better than preceding media-related laws. Among others, it decriminalizes defamation and establishes the Ethiopian Media Authority (EMA) which is in charge of licensing, regulating and monitoring the broadcasting media. The proclamation states that religious institutions shall not be issued broadcasting service licenses using the 'limited radio spectrum', but they may be issued with the license if they are not using the radio spectrum. It also guarantees the provision of a wide variety of information by the mass media that covers different views on politics, ethnicity and other issues, including religion. According to the proclamation, it is the responsibility of the broadcasters to make sure that they reasonably entertain different views when dealing with potentially controversial issues such as religion. Public service broadcasters in particular are required to provide news and programs that reflect religious and socio-political diversity. Above all, the mainstream media are obliged to deliver services that create shared national values on constitutional issues.

The vagueness of the legislation has a chilling effect on journalists' treatment of sensitive issues such as religion.

The Ethiopian Media Policy enacted in 2020 is also part of the reform and an outcome of a robust discussion among journalists, media managers, civil society groups, and government regulators. It is a comprehensive policy that applies to almost all forms of media. Among other issues, the policy allows religious institutions to own broadcasting licenses except for terrestrial radio broadcasting. The policy further stipulates that apart from their critical roles in addressing broader social, political, and economic issues, the mass media are also allowed to focus on a particular issue of their preference. Although it is not stated explicitly, according to this line, the mass media in Ethiopia have the right to focus only on religious issues so long as it is in the interest of the public.

Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation No. 1185/2020 can be taken as part of the regulatory apparatus on media practice. Its preamble notes that the proclamation is necessary to prevent and counter deliberate dissemination of hate speech and disinformation. Hate speech and disinformation are genuine threats to social harmony in Ethiopia, hence the proclamation, in principle, is justified. However, in practice it suffers from an unclear distinction between hatred and a critical view, hence the proclamation is open for manipulation by the government and other key stakeholders to stifle critical views against for example politics and religion. For instance, according to the proclamation, a statement may not be considered hate speech if it is part of religious teaching (Proclamation No. 1185/2020, Article 6/1/d). However, it is unclear whether it may amount to hate speech if one argues against or imparts the same message in a media channel. This begs the question: Who determines the intent of the utterance? The vagueness of such terms in the legislation has a chilling effect on journalists' treatment of sensitive issues such as religion. It also gives unstrained discretion for officials to indict individuals for hate speech. In short, due to the imprecision of key terms of the proclamation, it is hard to determine where free speech stops and hate speech starts (CIPESA, 2020). Some writers, for instance, Yohannes (2021) and Addisu (2022) argue that the proclamation's nebulous concepts and overbroad definitions of terms such as 'hate speech', 'disinformation' and 'disseminating' coupled with the Ethiopian court's lack of judicial review power has a chilling effect on freedom of

speech and journalistic activities. However, while the proclamation is debated, it is fair to acknowledge the government's interest in maintaining freedom of religion. While the proclamation exempts religious preaching from hate speech, it is by implication that the state allows people to enjoy their freedom of religion and religious discourse in the country.

Since 2018, Ethiopia has ratified various regulation that substantially enhances freedom of expression and media practice. The new administration has improved procedural rights for the media. However, considering the practical challenges that emanate from the interaction between freedom of religion and the thesis of secularism in the Ethiopian constitution, the scope of the aforementioned media policy and proclamations is inadequate to guide effective media practice on religious issues and their reporting. From the perspective of religious freedom in a secular state per se, according to Berhane (2009), despite the fact that the constitution safeguards religious freedom and demands the state not to interfere with religion, it is not supported by a "legislative framework that offers a clear guidance by defining the precise contours of the scope and limits of secularism" (2009, p. iii). Confusion exists among journalists and ordinary people regarding the practice of the secular state and the status of religion within it. Concerning the media landscape, Ethiopian media institutions are generally weak and restricted by ownership and political interference. The recent media reforms also face uncertainty and setbacks. Regarding the public sphere, ethnic and religious differences affect the culture of social and religious coexistence in the country for the worse (Karbo, 2013; Pew Forum, 2009). Religious intolerance is increasingly becoming a subject of concern.

Against this background, there exists no productive media policy which can guide the media on how to approach religion as an integral part of the social, political and cultural life in the country. For instance, in its editorial policy, EBC, the giant state/public media company in Ethiopia, requires the media to cover all religious groups. The policy says: "Cognizant with the importance of all positive values and their contribution to the co-existence of the people, EBC's journalists will pay fair attention to all religious denominations in the country." It also underscores that EBC shall remain a secular media institution (EBC Editorial Policy, article 3.1.11). Arguably, one can here see a misunderstanding of what secularism means. The secular principles should not mean that the media ignore stories and controversies related to religion. This is a fallacy and pushes away the burden of proof.

In recent cases, for instance the division of the Muslim ('Mejlis') in 2022 and the recent illegal appointment of bishops in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church in 2023 did get coverage by EBC, but only after the Prime Minister got engaged in discussions in the two cases. In an informal discussion with one of the editors of EBC, the editor confirms that they avoid reporting such issues since the station is defined as a secular media outlet. This is also the case with the regional public media since their editorials and strategies are fetched from the federal media. For example, the regional state broadcaster Oromia Broadcasting Network (OBN) did not give coverage of the recent Orthodox crisis as well as other religious issues. An OBN manager confirms that the station does not pay attention to such stories since they practice 'secularism' as part of their editorial agenda. Such an interpretation of the secular state principle in the media could be questioned. As noted by Berhane (2009, p. iii) defining and practicing secularism in religion continues to be blurred, and the same is now happening in the Ethiopian media and among officials and political elites.

Confusion exists among journalists and ordinary people regarding the practice of the secular state and the status of religion within it.

Religion is not intrinsically violent, but can potentially become conflictious when opportunist political actors exploit religious language through the media to push their own interest.

Ethno-religiously motivated political debates are an integral part of the mainstream political dialogue in Ethiopia. Regardless of the state media and state-affiliated media's intention to be 'secular', the presence of religion in the political discourse is inescapable. The media, directly or indirectly, have roles to play in the narratives and counter-narratives of religious and ethnic-driven identity political rhetoric in the country. Most importantly, the government is inclined to accommodate religion as a moral force on the political arena.

In summing up, the Ethiopian media are generally characterized by polarization. Studies show that media content in Ethiopia is biased towards ownership structures and owner interest (e.g. Behailu, Adem and Mulatu, 2022; Henok, 2022; Skjerdal and Mulatu, 2021). Specifically, the content is driven by ethno-political agendas. As can be seen in recent media reports, the biases could gradually permeate the religious sphere as well. Specifically, when there are conflicts and tensions in the country, religion risks becoming a center for polarization[4], either blatently or subtly. Religion is not intrinsically violent, but can potentially become conflictious when opportunist political actors exploit religious language through the media to push their own interest. As such, without clear formulation of media laws on religious reporting, the regulatory loopholes will remain wide open for manipulation. Unmoderated and unprofessional reports by the media on religion are therefore treacherous. Hence, developing policies and regulation that can enhance professional media coverage of religion is pivotal. If not, certain actors are prone to use the opportunity to push their religious and

4 Although the recent violence in the northern part of Ethiopia (the war between TDF and ENDF) is primarily perpetrated on the basis of ethnicity, the conflict also has an important religious dimension, see https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/posts/religion-and-the-tigray-conflict-in-ethiopia, On the contrary, Abbink (2022) argues that religious differences rarely add fuel to ethnic animosities, with some exceptions, and religious identities did not become part of the conflict in the war between the Ethiopian forces and TDF, see https://canopyforum.org/2022/10/26/has-religion-been-fueling-the-politics-of-conflict-in-ethiopia-a-cautionary-tale/.

The three archbishops of EOTC who illegally appointed 26 bishops present their case. (Screenshot from EBC)

Left: The three archbishops of EOTC give their views on the illegal appointment of the bishops. (Screenshot from EBC)

Right: Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed discussing the schism within EOTC with the archbishops. (Screenshot from EBC)

ethnopolitical agenda without due consideration of the public interest. This has been seen in the digital media during the recent chaos in the Orthodox church. The digital media, including TikTok, have become a platform for religious groups and followers, and are now a center for religious discourse in the country. Religious polarization tends to be higher on these platforms than in the mainstream media.

A scrutiny of selected editorial policies

This part analyzes selected editorial policies and other guidelines regarding reporting on religion. The assessment focuses on the editorial policies of three different media houses: Fana Broadcasting Corporate (private, but government-affiliated), South Radio and Television Agency (regional state media institution), and Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (federal broadcaster, state-owned).

Fana Broadcasting Corporate

In the preface of its editorial policy, Fana Broadcasting Corporate (FBC) declares that it works for the development of a multi-party system and communal harmony in the country. Key objectives of the editorial policy are to strengthen the constitutional system, uphold the rule of law, and ensure government transparency, accountability and fairness. Regarding its institutional culture, FBC claims to embrace democratic principles, professional commitment, continuous learning, public interest, and free speech as guiding principles. FBC also claims to focus on public-centered, timely, intriguing, and solution-driven news coverage. The editorial policy also indicates that the broadcaster will not report on inter-regional conflicts if it believes that reporting the incident exacerbates the conflict. If a conflict is covered, FBC will only focus on the causes of the conflict and its solutions. Moreover, the editorial policy states that FBC will not report any form of conflict that appears to be ethnic-related.

When it comes to the religious coverage, FBC aims in its policy to fairly entertain all religions without any form of favoritism. In respecting the constitutional separation of state and religion, no report will be accepted if it is believed to represent religious interference. FBC mainly reports on religious festivals declared as public holidays and celebrated by many. Regarding coverage of religious conflict, the FBC editorial policy states that the conflict can be covered in a manner that restrains further clashes and delivers solutions. Also, if a religious conflict is fatal and reporting it immediately is believed to aggravate the situation, the station will defer or cancel the story.

FBC's editorial policy underscores that due emphasis be given, at least theoretically, to religious issues. However, looking closely into the guiding princi-

FBC's editorial policy, which is more elaborate than the other two, restrains reporting on religion rather than embracing it.

ples, one can observe the broadcaster's approach of distancing itself from any claims of religious interference and asserting its stand as a secular media organization. The overall tone of the editorial policy on religious issues is to refrain from such reporting. If religious reporting does take place, FBC will navigate through the situation to impart solutions instead of reporting the incident as it happened. By contrast, when it comes to terrorism reporting, the editorial policy specifically says that FBC should present a detailed analysis of the consequences, victims, and horrendous features of terrorism acts. The editorial policy also does not mention whether the media institution should investigate fraudulent activities by religious groups. It instead pledges to expose illicit activities of groups and individuals disguised under the shadow of religion (not the religious organizations themselves).

In sum, FBC's editorial policy, which is more elaborate than the two others mentioned below, restrains reporting on religion rather than embracing it. Considering the fragile context in Ethiopia, it is of course understandable why FBC is cautious when it comes to religious reporting. However, its restrictive approach may not necessarily help to curtail 'religious conflicts'. Conflicts are multidimensional and complex (Silvestri and Mayall, 2015). What appears to be a religious conflict could have many causes. Therefore, when FBC tries to distance itself from what it considers religion and religious clashes, it indirectly draws a distinction between 'secular' and 'religious' conflicts; where secular issues are seen as rational to report while religious ones are seen as irrational. According to Cavanaugh (2009), this kind of distinction is dangerous and unsustainable – or useless when it comes to avoiding conflicts, to say the least. From a principal perspective, it is not ethical to keep public issues away from being reported in the media (Deuze, 2005).

As for STRA and FBC, the EBC editorial policy does not include details of what to report and how to report the religion and religious issues.

South Radio and Television Agency

Like FBC, the South Radio and Television Agency (SRTA) aims to be a bridge between the government and the public. Moreover, alike FBC, SRTA encourages its reporters to focus on solutions instead of reporting religious and ethnic conflicts as they happened. Concerning religious reporting, SRTA states that the company should not use any form of language, picture or video that scorns anyone's belief and culture. SRTA's editorial policy also avows that any content against the constitutional freedom of adopting religious beliefs according to one's choice should not be broadcast. It also noted that the agency is not allowed to present sermons of any religious doctrine, religious commercials, and announcements.

In general, the agency wants to use religion and religious organizations for social and national affairs. While their developmental activities, social support, and some messages support the government, the editorial policy of the agency does not give instructions on how to report religious conflict. Most of the articles in the editorial policy of SRTA are vaguely broad and lack a specific plan of action. The policy discusses a lot about journalists' responsibilities rather than the organizational duties to ensure professional integrity. Both the overall editorial content and the guiding principles about religion-related issues appear to burden journalists with many duties rather than encouraging them to report freely. The editorial policy does not encourage journalists to consider religious issues as an integral part of the lives of citizens. This might be the reason that the station ignored the recent religious cases in its coverage.

Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation

Lastly, to turn to the national public broadcaster Ethiopian Broadcasting Cor-

poration (EBC), the part of the policy concerning religion is very short. Similar to SRTA and FBC, the EBC editorial policy does not include details of what to report and how to report the religion and religious issues. It only states that the media should foster harmony by treating the religious groups in the country fairly. The policy underscores that EBC will report religious issues and serve all religious denominations by focusing on their contribution to the ethnic groups and emphasize good governance and economic development.

3.1.10 የአዲተሪያል ነፃነት

በኢትዮጵያ ፌዴራላዊ ዲሞክራሲያዊ ሪፐብሊክ ሕገ መንግስት አንቀጽ 29 በተሰጠን በነፃ የመገስስና የመገናና ብዙሃን ነፃነት ተረጋገጧል። በዚሁ አንቀጽ ቁጥር 4 መሰረት ደንግሞ ኢብኮ አንደተቋም የአሰራር ነፃነት ተጠብቆ የተለያዩ አስተያየቶች ማስተናገድ አንዲችል የህግ ጥበቃ ይደረገስታል። በመሆኑም ኢብኮ በህግመንግስታናስተቋቋመበት አዋጅ ቁጥር 858/2006 እና ፌሱት የህገሪቱ የመገናና ብዙሃን ድንጋጌዎች መሰረት ከማንኛውም አደነት የመጥና የመሰየ ተፅእናና ጣልቃ ገብነት ነፃ ሆና ይሰራል።

3.1.11 ከሃይማኖት ነጻ ሆና መሰራት

የኢብኮ ኃላፊነት እና አገልግሎቶች ከሃሰማዊ ህገጋትና መርህ ይመነጫል።በዚህም መሰረት ኢብኮ በሕገ-መንግስቱ አንቀጽ 26 መሰረት የሃይማኖት፣ የአምነትና የአመለካከት ነፃነትን አከብር ይሰራል። ኢብኮ ከሃይማኖት ነጻ ሆና የማሰራ ዓለማዊ (Secular) ተቋም ሆና ይቀጥላል። ሃይማኖቶች በሃገሪቱ ኢኮናሚያዊና ማህበራዊ አንቅስቃሴዎች፣ በብሄሮችብሄረሰብና ህዝቦች አብርነትና አንድነት ያላቸውን አስተዋጽኦ እና መልካም አሴቶች ተገንዘቦ ይልንም በፍትሃዊነት ያገለገላል።

ኢብኮ ከሀይማኖት በተጨማሪ ከፖለቲካና ሌሎች የአዲተርያል ነፃነቱን ከሚጋፉ ጉዳዮች ሙገናና ነጻ ሆና ይሰራል ።

Excerpts from EBC's editorial policy (2015). Clause 3.1.10 discusses editorial policy, while clause 3.1.11 concerns the 'secular' principle of EBC and the station's ideal to be free from any religious position.

An inherently 'treacherous' subject

Although the editorial policies of the three sampled media institutions distance themselves from committed religious reporting, it is hard to see how religion can be treated as wholly separate from socio-political and economic aspects of society. The myth about religion as an untouchable and sensitive issue impedes the media from approaching it like other issues. Practices on the ground and the selected editorial policies show that the mainstream media in Ethiopia consider religion as an inherently treacherous subject to deal with. In reality, secular ideologies such as nationalism (or Ethiopianism) can be as violent as religious ones (Cavanaugh, 2009). Besides, religious tensions and religious spaces can be further exacerbated by politicians. And religious ideologies can be as modus vivendi as secular institutions. Therefore, religion is not an irrational and dangerous impulse that has to be segregated from the so-called rational secular entities. Like the secular perspectives, religion has essential attributes for peace. Probably, it is with this insight that faith-based diplomacy is gaining importance in secular states such as the US (Silvestri and Mayall, 2015).

Similarly, in Ethiopia, the Inter-Religion Council of Ethiopia (IRCE) was established in 2010 to maintain peace and social cohesion as well as combat the evils that stem from religious extremism and radicalism. According to Karbo, "one of the most progressive approaches to social cohesion utilized by the IRCE was the establishment of the Inter-religious Dialogue – Ethiopia (IRD-E)." The writer, further, states that "the IRD-E was designed to develop interpersonal relationships among the various leaders of member faiths with the primary goal of learning about the cultural, ideological, and religious views of each faith" (2013, p. 49). IRCE consists of seven religious groups in the country, and they are working on various activities, including peacebuilding and reconciliation. These seven religious groups got chances for one-month televised prayers during the COVID-19 spread in 2020. Thus, instead of distancing themselves from religious issues, the media in Ethiopia would have played key roles in appropriating some attributes of religion as an instrument of peace in the country.

The current leadership often uses religious expressions in the realm of politics.

In summing up, the issues raised above indicate that Ethiopia is an ancient country with a complex historical past. Religion is one of the forces that has sha-

ped its history. Throughout its political history, different leaders had different ways of approaching the state–religion relationship. Although religion is an integral part for the vast majority of the Ethiopian people, the leaderships since 1974 tried to decouple religion and politics, at least theoretically. The 1987 constitution of the Derg and EPRDF's 1995 constitution instituted a secular state that separated state and religion. Particularly, the socialist Derg took a more radical stand against religion than its successors – EPRDF and PP. Among others, the Derg de-established the role of the Orthodox church in the country's politics. However, despite such constitutional stipulations and radical ideological principles against religion, the core values of Ethiopian communities are still religiously conditioned and often prompt religious revivalism within the polity. Probably owing to such social contextual factors or other reasons, the current leadership often uses religious expressions in the realm of politics. The religious overtones of the prime minister in particular, to some extent, signify the need for religious revivalism within the political sphere. For these reasons, it is hard to dissociate the state–religion relations in contemporary Ethiopia.

In the pre-Derg era, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church had strong connections with the state and had potential influence on political affairs. The Derg and EPRDF eras attempted to disconnect the state from the church, at least in their constitutions, and continued to allow the society to be free to believe any type of religion. Today there is a range of religious institutions and denominations on the scene. As a result, it is often argued that religious polarization is becoming a concern in the country.[5] On the other hand, although "religions have not succeeded in using their potential for peacebuilding" (Boulding, 1986 cited in Silvestri and Mayall, 2015, p. 16), they have important roles in conflict resolution, particularly in religious societies like Ethiopia. Actions are therefore needed from key socio-political actors such as the media to navigate through religious norms to appropriate them for peacebuilding and reconciliation. To do so, the media should have policies and guidelines on how to cover religion and religious groups.

5 Mohammed Girma told Deutsche Welle on 5 June 2022 that, "There are powerful individuals and groups with vested political interests who are exploiting a very sensitive religious space for their political purposes. Instead of being a tool for social cohesion, religion is now becoming a political weapon. This is extremely worrisome." See https://www.dw.com/en/interfaith-tensions-simmer-in-ethiopia/a-61712061.

3. The religious media landscape in Ethiopia

By Terje Skjerdal

There are between 40 and 50 legally registered religious broadcasters in Ethiopia today. They are not allowed to transmit on the local airwaves, so they 'broadcast' through websites and satellite. This chapter gives a snapshot of the emerging religious media landscape.

Broadcasters owned by religious organizations were allowed for the first time with the 2021 media proclamation. Ahead of the passing of the proclamation, the government-appointed Media Law Working Group arranged a series of consultations where also the religious community was invited to give their view. For many years, there had been concern that the Ethiopian ban on religious broadcasting contravened the principle of freedom of religion as manifested in article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Gebru, 2015b). The final proclamation came to be a compromise between religious rights and government control in the sense that religious institutions are given the right to apply for a licence for broadcasting, but they are not allowed to use the 'limited radio spectrum'.

However, the wording in the media proclamation is rather confusing. Clause 40(2) reads that religious institutions "shall not be issued with broadcasting service licence using the limited radio spectrum", while clause 40(3) says that religious institutions "may be issued with broadcasting service licences not using the limited radio spectrum". According to Solomon Goshu, member of the Media Law Working Group, the correct interpretation of these seemingly contradicting clauses is that religious institutions are entitled to apply for broadcasting licences, but they are not allowed to use the local FM band (personal interview, 14 Dec 2022). In actuality, this means that religious broadcasters must rent space on a satellite or use the internet for transmitting their content. One may reasonably ask what purpose the licence serves given that satellite and internet communication is freely available

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ETHIOPIAN MEDIA AUTHORITY

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የምስክር ወረቀት

Religious Institutions Free Satellite Broadcasting Service
Certificate

ቀን: 24/12/2014 ዓ.ም
ቁጥር፡-14/2014

1. የባለፈቃዱ ስም: ጀይሉ ሚዲያና ኮሚኒኬሽን ፒ/የ/ኩ/ማ
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ስልክ ቁ 0113696932 ፖ.ሣ.ቁ: 7288
ኢሜል: jeilumedia@gmail.com
3. የፈቃድ ባለቤትነት ዓይነት: የሃይማኖት
4. የፈቃድ ዘመን: 10 ዓመት
5. ስርጭቱ የሚሸፍነው አካባቢ: ዓለም አቀፋዊ

• ይህ የብሮድካስት አገልግሎት የፈቃድ የምስክር ወረቀት የብሮድካስት መሣሪያዎች ለመግዛት የቤት የማረጋገጫ ሰርተፍኬት ሆኖ አያገለግልም።

1. Name of License. Jeilu Media & Communication PLC
2. Name and Address of the Broadcasting Station:
Name. Jeilu TV
Address: Region. Addis Ababa Sub City. K/Keranyo
Woreda. 07 House No. New
Tel.No. 0113696932 P.O.Box. 7288
Email. jeilumedia@gmail.com
3. Type of ownership. Religious
4. Duration of License. 10 Years
5. The coverage of transmission area. International

• This Broadcasting Service License does not serve as a certificate of compliance to import Broadcasting Equipments

ሙሉመር አድራስ ሙ.ተ.ሥ
ፈራሚው ፊርማ / Signature

Example of a religious broadcasting licence: Jeilu Media & Communication. The licence is issued for ten years, but an annual fee must be paid in order to have it maintained.

without a licence, but having a licence gives a certain status and is believed to bring some sense of resilience against interference from the authorities. Without a licence, organizations suspect that they can be prosecuted if they continue to produce and distribute media content on a systematic basis for an Ethiopian audience. The licence also has a practical function and works as a ticket to get access to events such as government press conferences.

The authorities on their part see the licences as a means to 'collaborate' with the religious institutions. "It gives the government a chance to work closely with the religious television stations in peacebuilding," explains Yonatan Tesfaye, who is deputy director general of Ethiopian Media Authority (personal interview, 12 December 2022). After they started to award licences in August 2022, EMA has observed a positive tendency with the religious media producers in the sense that they appear to have become more responsible. EMA has had a number of consultations with the religious community, and the organizations are invited to seminars and workshops with EMA every three months. The purpose of the seminars is to foster responsible reporting, in addition to informing the organizations about observations by EMA of possible violations of the conditions for broadcasting. The 2021 media proclamation has specific guidelines for treatment of religious content in the media and makes it clear that, "Any religious program which incites religious hatred or undermine any religion or belief of others, and provokes religious intolerance is prohibited" (clause 70(2)).

EMA spends considerable resources on media monitoring, and the increase in religious content means more work for the monitoring section of the authority. The section is divided into different monitoring teams (public media, private media, community media, etc.), and the introduction of religious broadcasting licences has given way for a new monitoring team concentrating specifically on religious programming. EMA has already begun to use its power to revoke licences when they come across behaviour which the authority regards as intolerable. This happened for example to an Orthodox channel which mainly distributes its content through YouTube, Mahibere Kidusan Broadcasting Service, in May 2023. The channel's licence was temporarily withdrawn after the station in the view of EMA went beyond its religious broadcasting mandate when it presented 'breaking news' in relation to the ongoing controversy within the church concerning the appointment of new bishops. The licence was returned five days later after the EOTC Diocese got involved. What the case shows is that the religious 'broadcasting licences' have already attained legal standing with the Ethiopian authorities, even if the concer-

ned media platforms (Internet and satellite) are freely available to anyone across the globe without a licence. Local radio broadcasting, on the other hand, which throughout the world would require a licence, is beyond the reach for Ethiopian religious organizations.

The reason given by EMA for the ban on religious radio is that the airwaves should be reserved for public interest media, and since Ethiopia apparently has more limitation in radio frequencies than other countries, the authorities have decided to exclude religious broadcasters from radio operations (Yonatan Tesfaye, personal interview, 12 December 2022). The explanation is strange. FM transmitters in Ethiopia use the same technology as in other countries, and the radio receivers are no different than elsewhere. The regular FM band can accommodate a range of stations – it is common for different countries to divide it into 100 frequencies. Even in a situation where it was untenable to give each religious organization their own frequency, one practical solution could be to make churches share frequencies, as is the practice in other countries. It is therefore tempting to suggest that the ban on radio broadcasting rather reflects the government's continued desire for a certain control with the airwaves. Among media people, there are rumours that the actual reason for the ban is anxiety that 'extreme' Muslim groups will exploit the radio medium to spread their message – given that the radio is still the most important media channel for many Ethiopians, especially in rural areas. "What we heard is that the government will not open up the FM radio wavelength because of fear that some Muslims groups will dominate the media," says a manager in one of the local Christian stations, characteristically. In the absence of a radio licen-

It is tempting to suggest that the ban on radio broadcasting reflects the government's continued desire for control with the airwaves.

Ethiopian Media Authority (EMA) issues the religious broadcasting licences and monitors the broadcasts. (Photo by Terje Skjerdal)

ce, the religious organizations transmit their programmes on the Internet, where YouTube seems to be the most popular platform. However, the organizations realize that the reach of the Internet is limited. "We are not able to reach most of the population through YouTube," says one manager.

The process to get a licence for religious broadcasting is straightforward.

The process to get a licence for religious broadcasting is straightforward. The main criteria is that the applicant must be registered as a religious society with the Ministry of Peace. Once issued, the licence lasts for ten years provided that the annual fee of around 15,000 Ethiopian birr (USD 250) is paid. With regard to content, the licence requires that the organization abides by the mentioned rules for religious programmes as defined in the media proclamation. EMA does however presume that the programmes should concern religion and do not turn into a current affairs show, for example. According to EMA's deputy director general, "as long as they preach their own religion to their own community, show worship and songs and things like that, it's all good" (Yonatan Tesfaye, personal interview, 12 December 2022).

Four cases of religious broadcasters

The programmes were saved on a flash drive and brought physically to Khartoum with travellers who went to the Sudanese capital.

A range of religious communities in Ethiopia has been issued with broadcasting licences since the licensing process started in August 2022. More than 40 organizations have got licences by the end of 2023, while EMA expects the number to grow to close to 50 when all potential organizations have been licensed.

The following section will take a look at four of the most active religious media producers in the country – three Christian channels and one Muslim. All channels have a fair number of fulltime workers, with Orthodox TV having the highest number of employees, close to one hundred. All four channels have TV production which is distributed through YouTube and other Internet channels, while some also rent space on satellite in order to reach tv audiences in Ethiopia who increasingly subscribe to satellite channels.

Africa TV – the first Islamic broadcaster

Africa TV is one of around 10–12 Muslim media companies in Ethiopia. The television station started around 2010 and was the first media company to broadcast content for Muslim audiences in Ethiopia. However, at that time religious broadcasting was prohibited in the country, so the station transmitted its programmes from Khartoum. The production, though, took place in Addis Ababa, like the approach used by Christian broadcasters. The programmes were saved on a flash drive and brought physically to Khartoum with travellers who went to the Sudanese capital. Africa TV could not afford the flight ticket, so a staff member showed up at Bole airport in the morning and asked passengers who were on their way to Khartoum whether they could bring a flash drive with them. At the arrival hall in Khartoum, the courier would be greeted by a person from Africa TV who took the programmes to Africa TV's main offices in the Sudanese capital. The procedure would happen frequently, perhaps several times a week, and it went on for many years.

Today the headquarters of Africa TV have moved to Addis Ababa, specifi-

The Muslim production company Africa TV started around 2010, before religious broadcasting was allowed in Ethiopia.

The studios of Africa TV are located in the basement of the al-Aqsa mosque. (Photo by Terje Skjerdal)

cally to the al-Aqsa moque not far from Sidist Kilo. Africa TV produces content not only for Muslims in Ethiopia, but for audiences in many Sub-Saharan African countries. The company has three different tv channels. Africa TV 2 uses Swahili (for East African audiences), and Africa TV 3 uses Hausa (for Nigerian audiences). The content for these two channels are mostly produced abroad. The original channel Africa TV 1, however, is for Ethiopian audiences, and has content in Amharic, Afaan Oromo, Tigrinya and Afar languages. The station produces close to 20 hours of live broadcasting per week, plus reruns.

The content of Africa TV focuses exclusively on Islamic teaching. According to the executive manager, "We only teach Islam, the Quran and the hadith. We create awareness about the Sharia law regarding different things." The range of topics is still wide, from personal health to economics, sometimes even glimpses of sports and entertainment. The main emphasis is on ethics and how to live a spiritual life. Audiences can submit questions to the channel, which happens a lot. The questions are answered by trusted Islamic scholars, like sheikh Mohammedzain Zahradin of the al-Aqsa mosque. The sheikh is optimistic about the opportunities the TV medium gives. "Ten years ago, we didn't have the chance to deliver messages to the wider society. Now we have millions of people who benefit from our media channel," he says (personal interview, 12 December 2022).

Africa TV has an editorial policy which excludes women from entering a programme host position. The leadership of the station has seen how women are used by other channels to entertain audiences, and Africa TV does not want that.

Africa TV has an editorial policy which excludes women from being programme hosts.

No women could be seen in the production team of Africa TV when we visited the studio facilities in December 2022. The production takes place in the basement of the al-Aqsa mosque, and since the mosque is holy ground, no shoes are

Sheikh Mohammedzain Zahradin responds to questions from the audience on Africa TV. (Photo by Terje Skjerdal)

worn in the production rooms. The main studio which is used for most of the production has a series of portable backdrops which will alternate depending on the topic of the programme. Islamic books – in Arabic – are obvious elements amidst the production equipment. Africa TV has a team of 15 fulltime workers, including support staff. The financing of Africa TV's programme production comes entirely from abroad, mostly from 'Muslim brothers' in Europe and the US.

Africa TV collaborates with almost all other Islamic media companies in Ethiopia, according to the station's management. One of the key production companies serving the Islamic community is Jeilu Media, which produced content for Africa TV for ten years, but now broadcasts its popular weekly 'Bilal Show' on a commercial broadcaster – Ethiopian Broadcasting Service (EBS). Bilal Show is only one of several religious programmes broadcast every Sunday on EBS, with reruns on Fridays. Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant tv production companies all pay for airtime to broadcast their programmes on EBS, which is one of the most popular commercial TV channels in Ethiopia and has wider reach than YouTube. According to one source, the production companies pay around ETB 40,000 (USD 700) per month to broadcast their content on EBS.

Jeilu Media is careful not to provoke Christians.

Like Africa TV, Bilal Show uses imams to answer questions from their audience, but it has a more lenient gender policy. Women are allowed as presenters and reporters on Bilal Show, even if the panel of Muslim scholars answering questions from the audience will consist of men only, necessarily.

An experienced production company, Jeilu Media is highly cognizant when it comes to any potentially controversial issue on Bilal Show. They are careful not to provoke Christians. They are also cautious when touching on political issues. Achieving balance in the presentation is important. An interesting technique which Jeilu Media applies when covering political issues is to include the government as one of the sources. Once the government is included in the story, the official view will have been presented and the authorities are likely to be happy.

Africa TV on its part does not touch politics at all. The station's perception is that the religious broadcasting licence is given on condition that they should not cover political issues or discuss other religions in their programmes. "We don't analyse political issues. We calm down

the people and follow the rules of the government. The objective of our tv station is only to educate the Muslim population," explains the station's manager (personal interview, 12 December 2022).

Orthodox TV (EOTC TV) – the largest religious broadcaster

Among a handful of Orthodox-affiliated broadcasters, Orthodox TV, better known as EOTC TV, is the one which is most closely connected to the central EOTC organization. The operation of EOTC TV is directly financed by the Holy Synod, which is the highest authority of EOTC in Ethiopia. Unlike other religious broadcasters, EOTC TV does not depend on any support from abroad, and it does not arrange fundraising among supporters. With more than 90 staff members, the media organization is the largest of all religious broadcasters in the country. The television station was founded in 2015 and is thus relatively new, but it builds on the previous media department of the Orthodox church which has produced print publications for decades. In the first few years prior to 2018, the television programmes were broadcast from abroad through an Israeli satellite company based in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Today EOTC TV transmits its programmes through EthioSat, the state-owned satellite service.

EOTC TV has a large production team with around 40 hours of programmes recorded each day. This means that the station broadcasts its content through more than one channel, and in three different languages – Amharic, Afaan Oromo and Tigrinya. The content differs slightly from most of the other religious broadcasters in the sense that the topics are not strictly related to spiritual matters. EOTC TV has children and youth programmes and programmes focusing on social and environmental issues, but more challenging, the station also produces news and current affairs. At the same time, the station is careful not to get engaged in politics, according to its former director (personal interview, 11 December 2022). However, with the recent conflict in EOTC, it is inevitable that EOTC TV has reported on issues which approach the political field. In the conflict, EOTC TV has stayed loyal to its patron and owner, i.e. the Holy Synod and the central church administration. This also implies tensions with the government, which intensified with the Meskel Square dispute in 2021 and 2022. During the debate, EOTC got more and more frustrated with the state media, to the extent that the church eventually decided to decline any interview request by EBC, Fana and other government-affiliated channels. Journalists from EBC were no longer welcome to the patriarch's residence. Given that the state no longer has monopoly in television broadcasting, EOTC could use its own channel to reach at least parts of the population with their version of the dispute.

Unlike other religious broadcasters, EOTC TV does not depend on any support from abroad.

The staff of EOTC TV are all members of the church. It is unthinkable that the station would employ someone from another faith, such as a Muslim, for example.

Pax TV – a Catholic media channel in Ethiopia

The Catholic church in Ethiopia is small in comparison with the other Christian churches in the country. The overall membership is 70,000, which is little in a population of 120 million. However, the media strategy of the church is ambitious. The Catholic television company in Ethiopia, named Pax TV, was founded in March 2021, but already has a 24-hour programme schedule with 8–10 new programmes produced every week. The plan is to have around 20 different programmes weekly in a short while.

All programmes on Pax TV have a spiritual orientation. Several programmes contain elements from a church service like prayer, liturgy and psalms. Then there are Bible study programmes, family

Pax TV/Catholic TV was established in 2021 and has expanded quickly.

programmes and children programmes, plus programmes focusing on health, philosophy, and peace and justice, and more. Like the other religious channels, Pax TV will hardly cover any controversy. It would perhaps seem strange for a religious station not to mention the ongoing tensions in a congregation next door, but that was exactly what happened during the attempted schism in the Orthodox church in January to February 2023. Pax TV did not mention the issue at all, except when the cardinal prayed for healing of the situation.

The Protestant church accounts for the highest number of broadcasting licences in Ethiopia.

The Catholic television station initially rented airtime on EBS, but it later got its own channel on EthioSat which is necessary because of its 24/7 programme schedule. The staff consists of 14 employees plus volunteers (March 2023) and is expected to grow. The station found space for its studios and production facilities next to St. Michael Church in the eastern part of Addis Ababa, but there are plans to construct a media production centre in the middle of the city in a complex which will also house a school where young people can be trained for media work.

It should be mentioned that Ethiopia has a long tradition for Catholic radio programmes, if one also includes broadcasters operating from abroad. Vatican Radio has transmitted shortwave radio broadcasts from Italy to Ethiopia in Amharic and Tigrinya since 1948 (Janas, 1991, p. 57), and today also has programmes in Somali. Pax TV has content in Amharic only. There is no direct collaboration between Pax TV and Vatican Radio, but Pax TV sometimes use news from Vatican Radio in their own broadcasts and on their website.

Yemisirach Dimts Radio – a 60-year old Protestant voice

The Protestant church accounts for the highest number of broadcasting licences in Ethiopia. A range of different congregations have their own radio or television channel. The most historic one is clearly Yemisirach Dimts Radio, which started in 1963, at the same time as the inauguration of Radio Voice of the Gospel (RVOG). Yemisirach Dimts (YD) – meaning 'Voice of Good Tidings' – was the Ethiopian component of RVOG which lasted until the station was nationalized by the Derg in 1977. YD was resurrected in 1992, and got new radio studios at the Mekane Yesus Seminary in Mekanissa in the southwestern part of Addis Ababa in 1996 where the station is still located.

Until recently YD had television programmes which were transmitted on satellite, but the fee came to be too high for the organization. Thus, the television wing of YD is currently not operational. The annual fee for renting satellite space is USD 250,000 per year, according to Wakshuma Terefe, YD's manager (personal interview, 13 December 2022). It is known that the fee can be reduced considerably if the amount is paid through the black market, but this is not an option for a church which claims to keep high ethical standards. The radio pro-

Wakshuma Terefe, manager of Yemisirach Dimts, with the station's programme schedule. (Photo by Terje Skjerdal)

grammes of YD are distributed through YouTube. It is not a perfect solution for the Mekane Yesus church which has many members in rural areas with no Internet access, particularly in the southern part of the country. The radio station wishes that the government could genuinely open up the airwaves for religious broadcasters and start issuing licences for local radios.

With more than ten million baptized members, the Lutheran Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus is the largest Protestant church in Ethiopia and the largest Lutheran church in the world (Ebisse, 2022, p. 23). The Protestant family in Ethiopia has a range of other denominations as well, including Pentecostal congregations. All the larger churches and some of the smaller ones have their own broadcasting licence, and the content is as diverse as the congregations are. Some of the smaller congregations have a charismatic outlook and preach a 'prosperity' type of gospel. Several of the informants interviewed for this study express frustration with such congregations which are often built around a charismatic personality. Some do not even live in the country but belong to the Ethiopian diaspora in the US, from where they produce programmes which are broadcast back to Ethiopia. "They create conflict and do false teaching. They have a lack of vision and experience. Sometimes they cross the red line. They even name the Orthodox church," imparts an informant who belongs to one of the Protestant congregations. An informant who has trained Christian media personnel is optimistic, however, and believes that the irresponsible channels will improve over time.

4. Religious issues and media reporting

By Mulatu Alemayehu Moges

This chapter focuses on religious reporting in the Ethiopian broadcast media with a view to identify what the dominant discourses are, and how religious issues are framed. A quantitative content analysis and a qualitative textual analysis have been applied, scrutinizing media that are regarded as relatively influential in the media landscape.

As noted in the introduction to the report, the study selected ten media channels in order to identify major trends in reporting religious cases. The approach is issue-specific analysis. When it comes to the qualitative textual analysis, the study considers two private media outlets, namely ESAT and Prime Media. Stories broadcast by these two media channels were purposely selected to identify the overall framing of a specific case. While the study refers to many different cases, the qualitative textual analysis focuses only on the attempt of schism of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) in January 2023 and the coverage by two media channels (ESAT and Prime Media). This helped us to get a focused analysis in this part of the study and to scrutinize up-to-date content among the many contested events in the country.

Coverage of religious issues

For the quantitative analysis, the study found 98 relevant stories from the sampled media, specifically from EBC (25 stories); Fana (7); Nahoo (18); OBN (0); AMC (11); ESAT (20); Walta (3); AMN (6); EBS (8); and SRTA (0). This part of the study will discuss how these stories were reported, how they were framed, to what extent they critically reported the cases, and so forth.

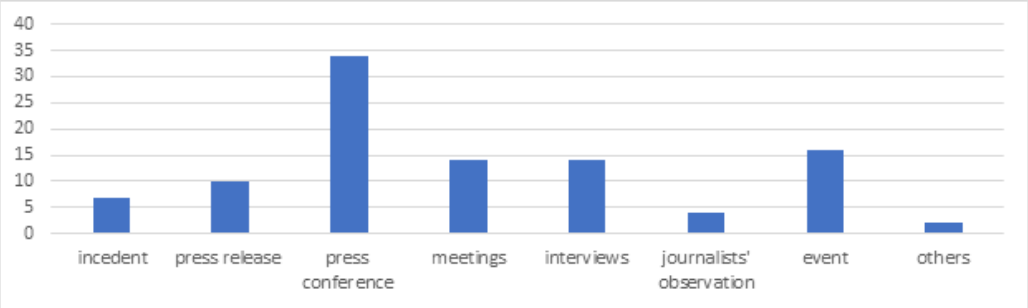

Figure 3: Source of the story

Origin of the stories

The study assessed the origin of the stories, which were either press conferences, press releases, incidents, journalist observation, interviews, or other. The study found that the media tend to report incidences of religion shallowly. Many (34.7%) of the stories were based on press conferences. By its nature, a press conference is a well-orchestrated media event that could help the organizers send their framed message to the audience. Hence, the exact causes of the problem might not be thoroughly reported since the journalists may not get sufficient information of the actual incident. The organizers of the press conferences prepare the messages that they want to send through the media. As such, it is hard for the media to report critically so long as they are limited to the parameters of the press conference, which is typically organized by the government or religious leaders. The media may not get the opportunity to ask critical questions and further probe the organizers on important public issues, which means that press conferences are mostly staged events.

Most importantly, as figure 3 indicates, reports based on journalists' own observations are insignificant. It may imply that the issues covered by the sampled media are devoid of critical perspectives and a better understanding of journalists directly from the event or processes unfolding. Religious and other socio-political issues, in particular, demand journalists' ability to view issues from a different perspective. Without the journalists' critical observation and their curiosity in a neutral perspective, the media organizations may not be able to supply relevant information, verify facts stated by the government and other prominent actors, and elucidate the religious issues involved. Unlike the critical observation of professional journalists, press conferences do not reveal information that the government does not want to be exposed. Therefore, it is safe to surmise that the media face challenges in executing their public service duties by simply relying on information accessed from press conferences and meetings (or events organized by governmental and non-governmental organizations).

It can also be concluded that the media houses sampled for this study did not do any critical analysis or investigative stories[6]. This has wide implications. Since stories are mainly drawn from press conferences, events, and government press releases, investigative types of reporting based on the journalist's own initiative hardly occur[7]. The state media, in particular, focus on the façade – i.e. they try to show how the government mana-

The media houses sampled for this study did not do any critical analysis or investigative stories.

6 For example, there were some long interviews by independent channels such as ESAT and Prime Media which included groups of people where the issue was framed from the one side. From the side of the public/state media, there were long programs where they presented the Prime Minister attempts of reconciling both religious groups (Mejlis and the EOTC).

7 A journalist who produced a critical documentary at Fana Broadcasting Corporate received much harassment from the audience and different actors.

ge to control religious crises created by, as they call it, 'some anti-peace forces' before telling what the problems exactly are. The implication is momentous. When sensitive issues such as religion and ethnicity are reported superficially, the public does not get the opportunity to understand the true scale and cause of the conflicts.

The stories analyzed in this study lack diverse views. 67% of the stories were fetched from only one source.

Lack of diverse voices

The stories analyzed in this study lack diverse views. As can be seen, in the graph below, 67% of the stories were fetched from only one source. This means only one side of the story is told in the media. This simply does not bode well in a land of diversity. Ethiopia is a diverse nation. Thus, if a story is to be fair and credible, it should include as many sources and voices as possible. Relying on a single source often leads to slanted news coverage and deficient credibility. When many sources are ignored, despite the truthfulness of the news, many would perceive the particular news or the media at large are favoring one side, feeding further polarization. Using only one source for news coverage in a capricious and highly diverse social milieu such as Ethiopia signifies journalistic naiveté. In principle, the state-owned media are defined to be the servant of the public, but it is only the voice of the government and its affiliates which is heard. In a diverse nation like Ethiopia, the credibility of the news media relies on the diversity – of interests, ideas, sources, and perspectives. Without credibility, the media stir political and religious polarization.

The rest of the stories includes voices from two or more sources. But the overall number is small. Only 14% of the stories include diverse perspectives. They have more than two sources (see figure 4). This shows that the lack of diversity of voices is a chronic problem in the Ethiopian media when it comes to coverage of religious issues. Furthermore, as shown in figure 4, among the stories that contain more than one source, 68% of the stories reflect the ideology of only one group. This illustrates the trend in the Ethiopian media to present a one-sided view. Such one-sided news coverage would in turn have decisive impacts on the political and religious polarization in the country. Favoring only one group or ideology most likely results in out-group aversion and affective polarization – in other words fuelling a tendency for citizens to dislike and distrust those from another (political) party or religious group.

Only the voices of religious leaders and the ruling parties are being heard.

Dominant voices

Religion has recently become a central topic for politicians and other groups. While religious conflict arise, followers, analysts, experts and other sources are expected to comment on the cases. However, as indicated in the data below, in actuality only the voices of religious leaders and the ruling parties are being

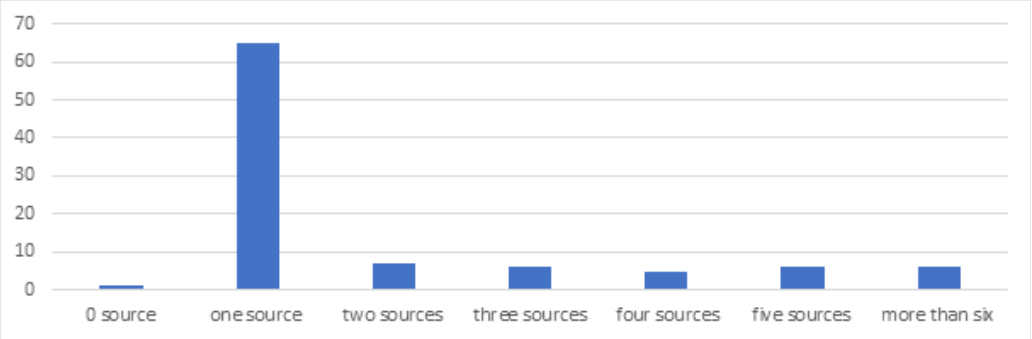

Figure 4: Number of sources in a story

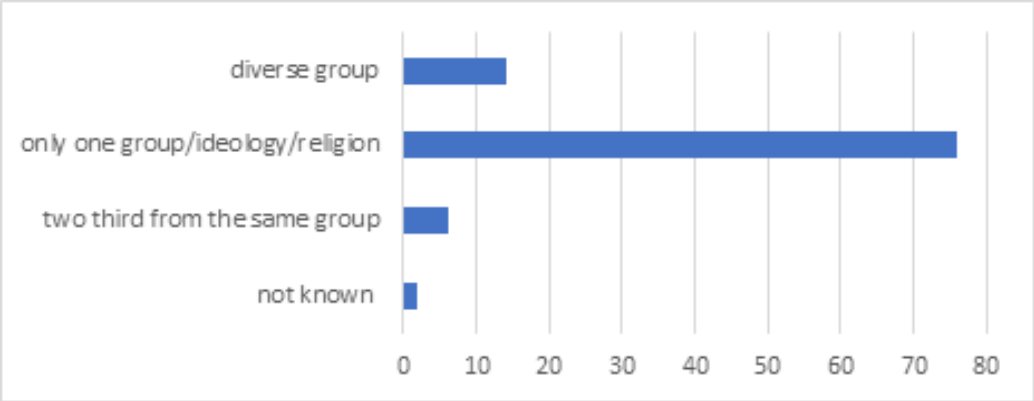

Figure 5: Composition of sources

heard. As indicated in figure 4, the vast majority of stories are based on a single source. Those stories using more than one source are also surprisingly coming from the same group, political ideology or religious denomination (see figure 5). These outcomes, more or less, are reflected here. If only one source is preferred in a news story about religion and religious issues, the probability is higher that it is a religious or political leader. The issues of trust and authority will be reasonable justifications for this. In terms of trust, as mentioned in chapter 2, not only the vast majority of the people, but journalists also themselves have a high level of trust in religious leaders (Skjerdal, 2017). Thus, using them as a news source might be the shortest and safest way to increase the trustworthiness of their news stories. Regarding authority, ruling party politicians of the current or past governments of Ethiopia tend to be included as sources in almost all stories. Whether the issues are within the realm of their expertise or not, politicians will be there to comment. While dealing with sensitive issues such as religious conflicts, journalists tend to prefer government sources to avoid the risk of political pressure and persecution (Mulatu, 2021). The quantitative data may also help us predict that in a precarious media environment and ethno-religious polarization, the Ethiopian media are likely to continue the trend of using one or two prominent public or government figures as their sources of information, particularly when it comes to critical issues. This leads to one-sided coverage and arguably exacerbates polarization as well as mistrust of the media.

Using only top political or religious leaders as their journalistic sources may not help to investigate the real causes of conflicts and seek lasting solutions. Both religious and political leaders as sources of information will typically only tell their side of the story as leaders of their respective groups. Ordinary people, dissenters, and other critical groups may have another perspective which will be ignored. Hence, when different sources are not combined in a news story, the probability is higher to pushing opposing poles apart. In that sense, even with their trends of using sources, the media can increase or decrease the level of political and religious polarization in the country. For now, their poor habits of using one-sided information sources may probably stretch the strings of polarization in line with religious identity.

Religious stories engagement vs. antagonistic views

Two types of narratives are observed in the sampled material. A dominant message is to encourage religious groups and their followers to unite. This most likely shows the tendency of different ethnic and religious groups moving towards homophily – i.e. the preference of religious members to be near others who are like them, with a lack of inte-

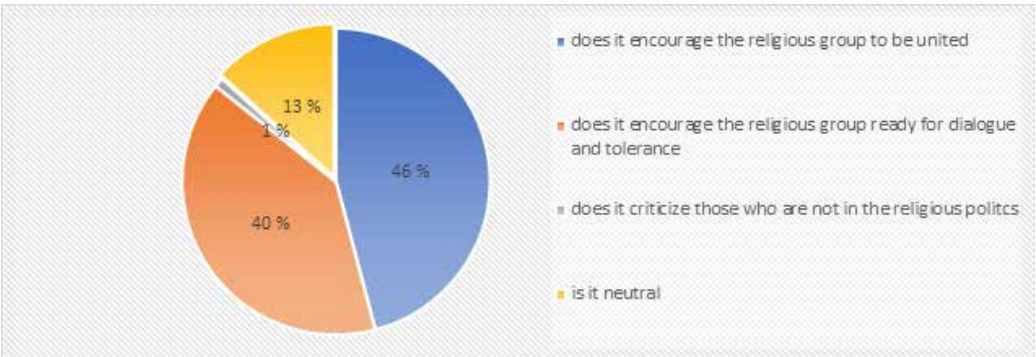

Figure 6: If the story talks about religious politics –

Stories in the sampled media tend to pose particular forms of engagement which could be offensive to other groups.

rest in showing diversity. It is a good example to understand how the media, knowingly or unknowingly, publicize the calls of different groups and individuals for locational, religious, and ethnic-based clustering. It, in turn, is a breeding ground for further religious polarization given that the media are helping the outreach of the views to a larger group of people.

On the other hand, another dominant message can be observed which encourages religious groups to be tolerant and to be ready for dialogue (figure 6). At face value, this message entails the public's frustration and considerable preference for discussions to maintain peaceful coexistence among religions, but from a critical perspective, this and the aforementioned calls for intra-religious unity are conflicting to an extent. This is because dialogue is hard to achieve when groups are not open to accommodate members of other groups and ready for inter-group cooperation. Of course, there is no problem to call for unity among members of a certain religious group. But when the unity inclines to homophily and scale up to the extent of avoiding those who are dissimilar to one's group members, discussions are likely to turn into 'us' versus 'them' rhetoric, and thus dialogue and entertaining diverse views are becoming hard to realize. Thus, merely calling for dialogue does not necessarily make changes and reduce polarization as well as animosity among the groups. On the contrary, a simple message via the mass media for intra-group unity can congeal the sense of out-group derogation – i.e. the tendency of negative behavior towards members of identified out-groups.

Therefore, if not for their weakness, as long as the media present messages that may not be easy to intertwine in actual contexts, they should dissect how such trends work in real-life scenarios. Yet, the stories sampled simply show the call for unity and dialogue. How this would happen may have to be elaborated by the media if they are part of the solution as they often claim to be when it comes to coverage of religious conflicts (see the discussion of editorial policies in chapter 2). Such way of reporting would have little or no effect in deciphering religious conflicts in the country.

And in the absence of such, they are essentially resolving disputes over unsupported kinds of information that have little to no impact on resolving religious disputes.

The other theme is somewhat different. It moves out from engagement to offensiveness. Stories in the sampled media tend to pose particular forms of engagement which could be offensive to other groups. The results shown in figure 6 confirm the preceding (us-versus-them) discussion. Negative outlooks towards others can be regarded as forms of abuse. Abuses and antagonism between groups are also typical features of any form of polarization. Spreading messages that solidify the 'us-versus-

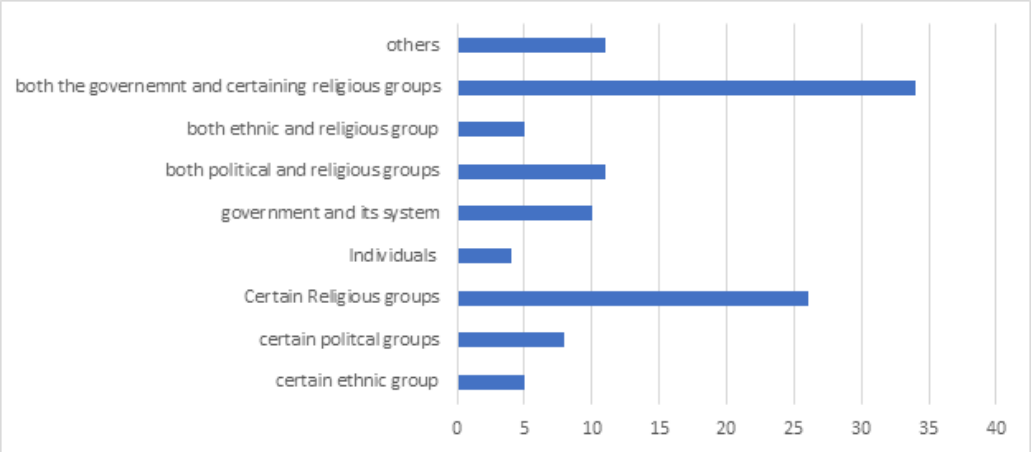

Figure 7: Messages against/towards

them' way of thinking about social and religious relationships is a direct form of 'othering'. Othering also leads to the perception of treating out-group members differently from the in-group members. By disseminating offensive messages, the media cannot expose different groups to each other's constructive views. It is an act of forging a common culture or stressing differences. Thus, as indicated by the previous discussion, by disseminating offensive messages that can breed othering in the general public, the media might be morphed into tools to stir religious polarization.

Moreover, as Figure 7 shows, most of the offensive messages target either the government and certain religious groups (approximately 35%, or 34 stories), or are directed towards a certain religious group (26.5%). In other words, the media messages are attacking the main actors who are supposed to lead the public in the effort to manage religious issues. Such forms of antagonism may therefore negatively affect the public trust in the authoritative power of the government and the mediatory roles of religious fathers in tackling disagreements. Low trust in the government, in religious groups/ institutions, and in people of other social groups, also entails othering and polarization. Thus, here again, either by negligence or deliberate actions or perhaps for a combination of both, the media are at the center of the religious polarization through their messages of othering.

'Us' and 'them' polarization

The data reflect polarization. As figure 8 indicates, a significant number of stories shows that groups and individuals emphasize the positive outlooks towards themselves. This is not surprising as such because as human beings, we tend to love ourselves and like groups we

Extremely negative views about others take the highest share of the story.

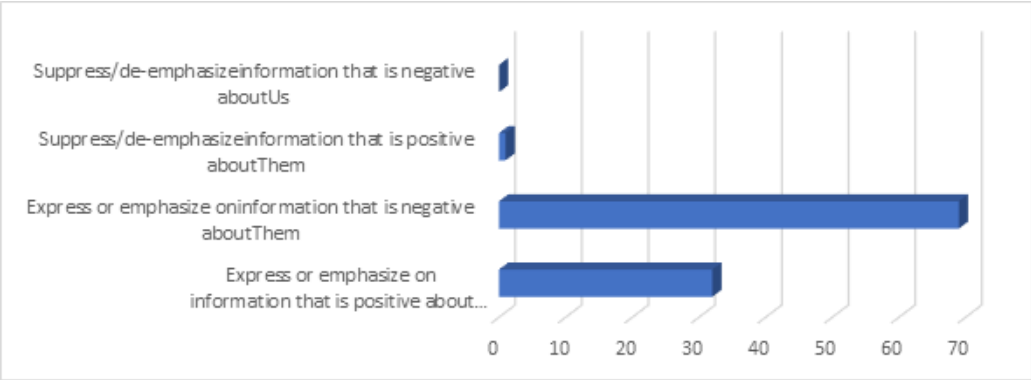

Figure 8: 'Us' vs. 'them' category

belong to. However, extremely negative views about others take the highest share of the story. This is a clear and new tendency of religious polarization in the Ethiopian media. Here, it should be clear that we are not arguing the media are on a deliberate mission of propagating polarization. However, when they broadcast distaste for those who differ from them, the media approve of the opinions anyway. It is known that the media would never be able to present everything happening around us[8]. They select, frame, and elevate the issues they believe their audiences should be informed about. Our perception of reality is affected by the way the media interpret and filter the sense of messages about the issues they discuss. Hence, if most of their stories reflect the negative outlooks of one group against another, they easily become echo chambers for particular groups. Publicizing messages that attribute positive qualities to one's in-group members and negative views to the supposed 'outsiders' can be a clear manifestation of engraining alienation. In that sense, the media are part and parcel of the ethnic and religious polarization. One important aspect here is the polarization of religion between 'us' and 'them'. However, except for the recent EOTC case, the rest of the stories could not clearly indicate who are framed as 'us' or 'them'. The audiences who know the context in fact can understand the 'them' when they are framed as 'anti-religious elements', 'anti-peace elements' and so forth. But, the media did not explicitly made it clear the identities of the two groups.

The Ethiopian media drive affective polarization of religious issues.

More specifically, directly or indirectly, through such actions, the Ethiopian media drive affective polarization – i.e. propagate intense negative feelings between groups – of religious issues. By giving space and time for negative narrations, they acknowledge bad emotions and unfounded judgments as well as entrench rivalry between different religious groups that can lead to extreme hatred, out-group dehumanization, and moral outrage. In a collectivist culture like Ethiopia, which focuses on group harmony, this cannot be considered a basic journalistic act of providing chances for all opinions to be heard. It instead is a serious risk taken by the media and poses a real threat to the disintegration of ethnic and religious communities.

The incessant flow of media stories that amplify 'us-versus-them' narrations cannot bridge the schism between groups. They would rather engrain ethnoreligious polarization. Such forms of polarization are likely to be irreversible, and the outcome will be havoc. Even one can ask, 'Are the media aware of their roles and the purpose of their establishment?' They may shrug in doubt, or nod in agreement. But it seems they might not be clear enough about their ultimate roles in working in the media. It is hard to tell if they are aiming for it. Their naiveté to predict the long-term effects of their practices may have vital roles in this.

Polarization in the attempted schism of EOTC

In January to February 2023, an incident happened in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) which caused heated debate both within the church and beyond. We found it important to treat the case separately since it pinpoints the treatment of religious issues by the current Ethiopian media. The case concerns the three archbishops of the EOTC who took an unprecedented initiative to appoint 26 bishops for Oromia and some parts of the Southern Nations and Nationalities. The act was deemed illegal by the Holy Synod of EOTC and brought wide opposition from the follo-

8 News stories should include diverse views so as to show the complete picture of the event. Then people could get a fair understanding of the situation.

wers and supporters of the church. This study does not go into a discussion of how and why the differences within the church arose. Rather, the study is dominantly limited to discuss how the two selected media channels (ESAT and Prima Media) deal with the case.

Generally, the Ethiopian media reveal two forms of polarization. The first one is in framing the recent case of the EOTC schism (for/against). The second one is by the extent of paying attention to the case (silence). There have also been certain differences related to the dressing code of the journalists.

Against/for frame

Regarding the media coverage of the disagreements in the EOTC, there are two dominant forms of reporting: in favor of or against the breakaway group of religious fathers. Their forms of reporting tend to either sympathize or ignore the causes of the EOTC with some attempts to avoid biases. In both forms of reporting, the media tend to send either negative or positive information about some aspects of the event. The media also used these two forms to send a message to the public based on that event. They may also be employed to sway public opinion.

While media should aim to be neutral and report stories in balanced and fair manner, some stories and reflections of journalists in the sampled media appear to be in contradiction with professional values. Instead of reporting the facts, they go against the one and favor the other. The sampled media (ESAT and Prime Media) used different techniques when they reported the EOTC case, briefly presented in the following.

Sensationalizing religion and ethnic groups

Journalists shall be impartial, free from opinion and neutral when presenting stories. However, the sampled media content contains opinionated and sensational stories. Prime Media, for instance, was found to be sensational in dealing with the recent EOTC case. In its programs '*Abeyit Gudayoch*' (roughly interpreted as 'Core Affairs'), Prime Media gave a sensationalist presentation of the disagreement within EOTC. The hosts of the particular program often selected stories and words that were emotionally loaded. At times they showed self-centeredness by trying to portray themselves as voices of the 'suppressed and hated' (by many political elites) such as 'the Oromo', as they described it. The journalists used the phrase 'Oromo Phobia' to indicate that there are many political groups disguised under the EOTC's religious altercations to attack the 'Oromo people'. They even bluntly claimed that these groups have homicidal political aims, particularly against the Oromo (የተሸነፈ ሀሳብ ይዘው በሀይማኖት ሽፋን ሀገርን የማሸበር ተግባር ሲ.ጋለጥ, roughly interpreted as "Exposing to the act of terrorizing the country under the guise of religion with a defeated idea"; Prime Media, February 13, 2023). This frame tends to link the issue to the EOTC case with ethnic identity, which is potentially dangerous. They frequently used hostile terms and hate words in their weekly discussions. The hate words were used to label specific groups as cruel and power lusting.

The sampled media content contains opinionated and sensational stories.

False claims

As mentioned above, journalists shall stick to truth, and they should write their stories by verifying facts. However, this was not seen in some of the sampled media in the recent case of the EOTC. Journalists in Prime Media, specifically, reinforce their expectations and biases about the situation by using false claims that are not only untrue but also unsubstantiated by data. For instance, they described the peaceful demonstration that was called by the EOTC as an incident organized by political groups. They claim that the demonstration was one hundred percent

The journalists categorized the political groups as 'murderers' and 'mad dogs' who attack anyone who challenges them.

appropriated for political aims by some political groups. The journalists categorized these political groups as 'murderers' and 'mad dogs' who attack anyone who challenges them. Furthermore, the media claimed that the groups desperately need to demolish the Ethiopian constitution and use the EOTC to impose a unitarism or a centralized form of government in place of the existing federal system (የሃይማኖት አባቶች እንደ ሃይማኖት አባት መሆን አለባቸው፣ roughly interpreted as "Religions leaders should act accordingly", streamed live on February 13, 2023). Such unsubstantiated and inflammatory remarks, a few of them mentioned above, cannot be considered manifestations of ethical journalism practices. Aligning altercations among religious fathers to a macro level of political sabotage and 'us' vs. 'them' categorization is a critical level of sensationalism and politicization of religious affairs. This surely polarizes issues which could ferment clashes among both religious and ethnic communities. All critical allegations need profound evidence and to be free from bias.

Manifesting political views

Considering religion and religious issues as political agendas is the other form of polarization that Prime Media applied in its coverage of the attempt of schism in the EOTC. Within this frame, it presented the religious issues in the EOTC as a political affair. For instance, in its *Abeyit Gudayoch* program aired on February 13, 2023, the journalists were more on the political aspect of religion than discussing the religious matters of the issue. The two journalists (female and male) hosting the program were into discussing the ethnic political affairs and the suppression of what they called 'unitarist forces' and the dominating ethnic group in the EOTC. The female co-host journalist, for instance, claimed that she had seen people crying with joy because they have seen the breakaway synod as a symbol of their political independence and some changing their religion back to Orthodox Christianity. This journalist did not dare to see, for instance, the large mass-gathering at Lideta and St. Ourael churches which was close to her office gathered against the illegal group. The journalist's claim of 'many changing back to the religion because of the new synod', in particular, is a way of intertwining the religious issues in the EOTC with basic political questions of the Oromo people. Her colleague then continued the discussion by stating that practicing religion in their mother tongue has been the question of the Oromo people for many decades. Hence, the new synod is the answer to this decades-long question. On the contrary, ESAT in its report claimed that language was not a problem in the EOTC and could not be the cause of the current altercation. The ensuing part discusses this.

Language as a cause

The two media houses framed the issue of using local languages for religious services and teaching quite differently. Prime Media argued that the EOTC discriminates against the use of Afaan Oromo and other local languages except for Amharic. Most of the program hosts who discussed this religious disagreement argued that the right of the Oromo people to use local languages for religious services and teaching has been suppressed for decades due to the political interference of some Amhara elites and political parties. It generally has a dismissive approach in this regard. Although it questions the limitations of using local languages for religious services extensively, ESAT tried to frame the issue as a duty in progress. That means it did not portray the issue as a deliberate act of suppressing other languages by the EOTC as Prime Media does. ESAT mentioned shortcomings in providing religious services in local languages. But it also supported the view

of the EOTC that expanding services in local languages is among the priorities of the church. For instance, in its '*Mogach*' program aired on February 5, 2023, ESAT tried to present the efforts of the EOTC in tackling language issues. As evidence, the interviewee, in this particular program, listed some local languages the church translated the Bible and other church books into.

Labelling political groups

Prime Media and EAST have been labelling others for being the cause of the problem. They have differences in the identity of the political groups who they believe are meddling in religious issues. Journalists in Prime Media boldly claim that political elites and parties from the Amhara region and in the capital city are behind the EOTC's bigoted treatment of the Oromo people. In their discussion, the journalists in Prime Media specifically listed out some political parties such as Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice (EZEMA), National Movement of Amhara (NaMA), and Balderas for True Democracy, which they believed are against Oromia/Oromo. According to the media, since these political parties are unable to use the political apparatus to 'loot and subdue Oromia', they have changed their tactics and come via the EOTC to execute their 'unholy' agendas. Yet, Prime Media used social media posts as sources for most of the serious allegations and ostensibly defamation. On the other hand, in its '*Mogach*' program (roughly interpreted as 'to probe') interview with a senior EOTC synod member, for instance, ESAT tried to indicate that some of the exuberant audience that welcomed the breakaway group in Oromia were not even followers of Orthodox Christianity and cheered the group to execute their political ends. The interviewer then called out that, as he could figure out from their t-shirts, some of them were supporters of Jawar Mohammed – a Muslim Oromo political figure and a deputy political party leader of the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC). According to the interviewee, the issue of EOTC is futile for Jawar and his supporters. He also added that Jawar and his supporters have track records of burning churches for other political reasons that have nothing to do with the EOTC. Therefore, Jawar's supporters showed up to welcome the breakaway synod because they arguably needed to sabotage the situation for their political aims (aired on February 12, 2023).

Accordingly, one can surmise that although the dimensions and the political groups blamed in the stories are different, both media houses in the sample portray religion as intertwined with and appropriated for political ends. In sum, the divergent views of both media houses on the religious disagreements in the EOTC, epitomize the media, political, ethnic, and religious polarization in the country. Their styles of reporting and methods of issue framing indicate misconceptions about the professional principles of journalism and the application of secularism from the media perspective. Most importantly, the way Prime Media and ESAT approach religious issues is as polarized as the political context in Ethiopia. However, the later one at least tries to be professional by including sources for its claim.

Both ESAT and Prime Media portray religion as intertwined with and appropriated for political ends.

Characterization

Naming a group could have great impact on the audience to perceive the messages either positively or negatively. The media presend the newly self-appointed synod differently. Comparatively speaking, Prime Media defended the breakaway bishops as a group of religious leaders who follow all the religious and administrative principles to appoint an episcopate – hence, it called the group the Synod of Oromia and Nations and Nationalities. The channel fully endorsed the group as legal and proceed their religious activities. ESAT, however, of-

While it the public media's role to provide neutral and balanced information for the public by scrutinizing different sources, they failed to do so in the recent EOTC case.

ten portrayed the group as secessionist religious fathers who attempt to form a synod in defiance of the religious and administrative norms of the EOTC. For instance, in its weekly news program aired on February 5, 12 and 19, 2023, and '*Mogach*' program on February 5, 2023, ESAT characterized the leaders of the breakaway group as 'popes who tried to form Oromia regional synod in disregard of the canons of the church and without the accreditation of the EOTC's synod'. Prime Media, generally, portrayed the group as a symbol of freedom on behalf of the suppressed nations and nationalities. Hence, the group came out is an assemblage of religious leaders that stand for the rights of the Oromo people in particular and nations and nationalities at large. ESAT on its part called it an 'illegal' and 'rebellious' group that disobeys the basic canons of Orthodox Christianity by plotting a synodal coup. In short, while the Prime Media characterizes the illegal group as a hero, ESAT named them as an illegal group, echoing the official line of EOTC.

Denial vs. greatness technique

Despite its considerable attempt to report the issue fairly, ESAT appears to be a genuine sympathizer of the EOTC.

The two media houses also had different ways of framing the agreement between the EOTC and the breakaway group. Prime Media argued that the group did not apologize to the EOTC. According to the media organization, the group simply came to terms with the EOTC following the mediation efforts of the government. An attempted frame, therefore, is that the group has all the legal rights and moral high ground to negotiate, accept or reject points which are on the table. ESAT, on the other hand, presented the group as illegal and morally unacceptable to acknowledge it has some truths on the matter. Accordingly, ESAT underlined the point that the breakaway group formally submitted a letter of apology to the EOTC, and it is mainly for this reason that the two parties agreed to resolve their differences. ESAT also underscored that the agreement was realized according to the religious canons of the EOTC and owing to the church's blessedness in forgiving offenders. This is often mentioned as a way of telling the EOTC's followers that their church has never compromised any principle simply for the sake of agreements with the group that tried to weaken its unity. This can be observed from the points selected and the amount of airtime ESAT allocated to the press conference of the EOTC about the agreement in its prime news hours. For instance, during its news hour on February 15, 2023, ESAT selected the points that affirm the greatness, unity, and reputation of the synod and its people in fighting against anyone who tried to abate its pre-eminence in the religious and socio-political aspects of communities (a weekly news program aired on February 15 and 19, 2023). Therefore, in ESAT's framing, the agreement was a manifestation of the EOTC's power and integrity in safeguarding its status quo even during challenging times.

In sum, the sampled media channels used different techniques to pursue their agenda by framing the recent attempt of the Orthodox church schism in a certain manner. Despite its considerable attempt to report the issue fairly, ESAT appears to be a genuine sympathizer of the EOTC. It reported most of the issues – such as the EOTC's call to wear black, legal issues, canons of appointing new episcopate, security forces attack on the faithful, political interferences in the church, and others – from the EOTC perspective. By contrast, Prime Media was heavily influenced by the new group's ideology and came out as a fan of the breakaway of the EOTC.

Silence as a frame

The second type of polarization which has been widely observed in the public/state-owned media is silence. It is a deliberate attempt to ignore or avoid reports about the event. While there have been

hot debates and narratives across the country, almost no public media dared to bring the EOTC issue to the public. They did not report the case for a long period. An informal discussion with journalists from the public media reveals that they attempt to promote secularism and therefore could not report the cases. Some other public and private media outlets noted that they received a clear warning from the government officials not to report this case[9]. However, they started reporting the case aggressively soon after Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed attempted to solve the difference between the two blocs.

The same form of reporting silence was observed in the case of the Mejlis controversies in 2021/2022. The public media aired the case after long silence. Then, they came with a report when the two blocs of the Mejlis had a discussion with the Prime Minister. This seems a trend in the public media silencing the public voice until the government officials start to talk about the case (Mulatu, 2017b/2021).

Here one can argue that the public media have the right to reframe themselves from reporting cases that do not go in line with their editorial policies. That is true. However, by any criteria, the recent alteration of the EOTC and the subsequent hot political narratives and killing of people in some parts of the country, such as in the Oromia region could not be far from the main news selection rules. Undermining the case, for instance, the mass killing in Shashemene in February 2023 by the security forces[10], by using the view of secularism, which is awkwardly interpreted in Ethiopian media and politics, avoiding the case being reported by the media is one of the biggest mistakes in the Ethiopian public media. At this moment, the public has a wider chance to access information since digital media have become available now. While it is their role to provide neutral and balanced information for the public by scrutinizing different sources, the public media failed to do so at least in the recent EOTC case. The media did not bring the real scenario of the country. This could have repercussions in the media and the journalists' future activities. The first is they lose trust. Second, they do not play their main role - informing the society. The public has the right to be informed. And thirdly, they missed a golden chance to play their roles in solving the problem by thoroughly investigating the case. As the main role of the media is serving as a platform, it would be possible to bring different ideas for discussion, and the public will get a chance to judge which idea is better.

The religious discourse of dressing in black vs. white

The polarization of the media today has also shifted from the journalistic story framing to the dressing frame. As indicated in chapter 2, the editorial policies of most of the sampled media do not support the media intervention in religion and vice versa. The recent incident in the EOTC, however, has clearly shown how journalists tend to reflect their position toward one group that they favor either in line with their religious, political, or ethnic elements. The recent EOTC schism created anger among millions of its followers and supporters. The church, then, called upon its followers to wear black clothing, fast, and pray for three days as a symbol of perseverance and truth for their religion. On the contrary, those who side with the breakaway synod, mostly in the Oromia region or ethnic Oromo in different parts of the country deliberately wear white clothes

9 This can true because in its televised message, the Prime Minister publicly warns his minister of council not to intervene in the current religion chaos.

10 https://mesfinkumelachew.wordpress.com/2023/02/07/shashemene-death-toll-from-massacre-of-orthodox-christians-now-over-30/

to show their stance against the EOTC's call. Several government offices have also banned their workers from wearing black clothes mainly to restrict support for the church's call. The church's call for solidarity and the government's ban on black clothing sparked debates among EOTC followers mainly on social networking sites.

By wearing black and white attire, both groups appropriated clothing as a metaphoric reference to negotiate and express their attitude towards the group they favor.

The ban by many government offices might have turned wearing black from a symbol of solidarity with the EOTC to a discourse of defiance of the government's decision and the breakaway archbishops[11]. Those who dressed white, similarly, used their dressing to communicate their opposition to EOTC and their support for the archbishops who refer to themselves as the Holy Synod of Oromia and the Southern Nations and Nationalities.

Thus, by wearing black and white attire, both groups appropriated clothing as a metaphoric reference to negotiate and express their attitude towards the group they favor. Simply put, the black and white clothes adopted by the opposing groups are ways of communicating about the respective groups' religious identity, tradition, and commitment to faith. It also chiefly signifies the religious polarization along ethnic lines. Clothing, in this case, is appropriated as an instrument to draw symbolic boundaries between people of different religious affiliations and ethnicities.

A freelance journalist working in an outsourced program of 97.1 FM station which is owned by EBC was fired after posting a picture on his Facebook page taken in the studio dressed in black cloth.

Thus, clothing becomes a medium of political, ethnic, and religious discourse. Indeed, the medium in itself is a message. Quoted in Macha-Bizoumi (2020), Roach-Higgins and Eicher (1992) state that "Meanings communicated by dress may emanate from its basic type, one of its properties (e.g., colour, shape), or a composite of its component types and/or properties" (Macha-Bizoumi, 2020, p. 25). Likewise, the meaning of the black clothing is already framed by the EOTC as a way of expressing 'perseverance in suffering', and 'making vows to all-powerful God'. This means, the garment itself is communicating the current situation of the church. Those who wear white, to the contrary, stand against these messages and affirm the ethno-religious cleavages. By wearing black or white, therefore, followers of both groups transmit their religious consciousness and the reasons why they align themselves with one group over the other. In this particular case, clothing serves as an act of differentiation between (religious) groups and has a profound symbolic importance for the construction of identity.

For instance, by wearing black clothes based on the declaration of the EOTC, the faithful reflect their commitment to shoulder religious obligations. They try to define their identity and convey it to others. The clothing is a gateway to (social and religious) inclusion and a means of resistance to the government's protection of what the EOTC called 'illegal groups'. Thus, the clothing is not a simple garment. For the wearers, it instead is a sign of social separation from the 'unfaithful', political dissent, and allegiance to the church's orders. It silently aligns them with the aims and causes of their church. By perpetuating the clothing code (black as a symbol of perseverance and truth), the church, in other words, is the creator of a symbolic dimension to construct and/or solidify the 'real' Christian identity (at least, different from the aims of the breakaway synod).

From the media perspective, although this white and black clothing discourse is massively surfacing online, in some instances it also crept into the main-

11 The state of secularism that was attempted to be practiced by the government failed here when the government office banning those who dress black to enter the office while allowing those who dressed white.

Mejlis leaders having discussion with prime minister Abiy Ahmed. (Screenshots from EBC)

stream media landscape. Journalists of the AMC, Nahoo, and SRTA, for instance, posted their photos in black clothes to show their solidarity with the church and its call. It is also mentioned that the Addis Media Network (AMN) interrupted a journalist who was dressed in black clothes from the newscast. Similarly, a freelance journalist working in an outsourced program of 97.1 FM station which is owned by EBC was fired after posting his picture on his Facebook page taken in the studio dressed in black cloth.

Such instances seem to be simple but transfer a vital point that the polarization in society is often embraced by journalists, and if not for strict editorial control[12] and government bans, the intermediation role of the mainstream media on the issue would have been substantial.

However, even though the mainstream public media do not propagate the issue as a political agenda, government offices' restriction on their workers from wearing black clothes pushed the discourse of the garment to enter the political arena as a symbol of defiance to the actions of the government. By banning it, the government might have boosted the symbolic importance of black clothing. And, by choosing to wear, the followers of the EOTC make themselves visible in the public sphere as part of the key actors in the struggle to maintain the church's hegemony.

The 'secularism' practice

As noted in the previous sections, the current leadership (since 2018) often uses religious expressions in the realm of politics in a way that signifies preferences to the revival of a religiously colored way of life. For example, the religious overtone of the Prime Minister's concluding remark in almost all-important speeches – '*May God bless Ethiopia and its people*' – should not be glossed over. Arguably, it is a consciously framed religious language intended to appeal to the majority of ordinary people who believe in divine intervention in their daily lives[13]. It also hints at the interest in restoring the national identity entangled with religiosity. The Prime Minister has even claimed that he has received a prophetic calling to become a prime minister years before coming to power. Like the majority of the ordinary people, he also often publicly expresses his trust in the divine favor of Ethiopia to tackle its socio-political crises. Amidst deadly conflicts and economic crises, the Prime Minister tries to persuade Ethiopians by prophetic tones that things are going to be great through God's blessing. Even someti-

12 The state controlled and some other private mainstream media were silent for long until the Prime Minister dealt with the issue.

13 98% of the Ethiopian population is described as religious.

mes, the Prime Minster has been heard that mothers and elders would pray for his safety when he has faced challenges. In his publicized speech, as mentioned earlier, he also has been begging these people 'to pray' for the successful implementation of his projects. This rhetoric reflects more of a faith-based prosperity than a political-economic plan.

One can observe the current government's interest in using religion and religious elements in the political activities in the country. Religious words and signs have been used by the Prime Minister and his fellows in their state activities. It, to an extent, contradicts Proclamation 1, 1995 which stipulates that, "The state shall not interfere in religious matters and religion shall not interfere in the state affair." However, what is stated and what the government is practicing are quite different. For instance, in the recent contentious disagreement among the Muslim leaders in 2021 and 2022, which was ended by the reshuffling of Mejlis's head, and placing a new leadership and the attempt of schism in the Orthodox Church following complaints of some group of bishops regarding management issues in the church and local language use in religious services was seemingly ended by intervention from the state. It is the Prime Minister who took the initiative to mediate the intra-religious problems in EOTC and the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council[14] (often called the Mejlis). All these instances can be taken as ways of direct management of religions.

In the recent Orthodox Church crisis, the Ethiopian government has shown complex and contradictory engagement in the religious and church issues. Recently, in his televised message (posted online on January 31, 2023, by EBC), the Prime Minister tried to reflect the government's non-interference to religious issues by taking the case of controversies rocking the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC). He declared that religious institutions would have been free from many problems if they distanced themselves from political affairs, theft, and ethnic alliances. In this speech, the Prime Minister tried to explain that the eternal aims of religion do not mesh with the earthly goals of politics and ethnic affairs, thus, religious institutions should abstain from those earthly deeds. In his presentation to the minister of the council, he also warned members of the council of the ministers not to interfere in the religious affairs of the church. Paradoxically, it is he who attempted to intercede and solve the conflict between the two blocs.

One can say that this is an indication that the state has an excessive interest in ensuring secularism and in giving the chance to the religious groups to solve their problems. However, there were many issues both in his speech and state actors in violating the ideology of secularism in the country. For instance, while the need to separate state and religion, the Prime Minister, simultaneously explained that his government has been doing a lot to support the EOTC – such as by granting lands, returning expropriated properties, facilitating the construction of churches in some Arab countries, and many others. He also emphasized the role of his government in mending the conflicts between the synod that was in exile and at home. By comparing his leadership to his predecessors', the Prime Minister tried to show the accommodative attitude of his government. In the speech, the Prime Minister anchored the EOTC as a historical and cultural heritage, therefore, everyone should support it. Putting the veracity and practicality of the support the Prime Minister claimed his govern-

14 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PXphHmh34Ig

ment has done a lot to the church aside[15], simply based on the claims, how can one say that the state is free from intervening in religious activities?

The followers of the EOTC, nevertheless, are unconvinced by the Prime Minister's rhetoric and blame his government's opportunistic moves. According to the view of the latter group, the government is oscillating between working with the church when it needs political gains and trying to distance itself as the church and its followers need protection[16]. The overall argument from the EOTC is that due to the government's lack of swift action, the church is under threat by organized groups in the name of freedom of religion and democracy. If the government fails to curtail any form of attack against religious institutions and actions that endanger religious communities by organized groups, it shows the government's weakness in enforcing the law. It should be responsible thereof.

The understandings of secularism referred to here may be debated[17]. First, the vagueness of both parties regarding the essence and practice of secularism is one point of departure. The cultural construction of secularism, in particular, is not clear. Second, the conflictual relations between ethnic and religious groups are still a serious problem in the country. Third, despite the constitutional stipulation of the functional differentiation of political institutions and religion, it is still unclear whether both political and religious actors attempt to instrumentalize religion for a political power struggle, even in times of war. Fourth, the configuration of state, nation, and religion is not practiced well defined in the country. The extent of the government's accommodating attitude and the role of religion in politics and public life are still unclear. The recent instances indicate that the current government faces challenges in enforcing the constitutional principles towards religion, and the state-religion relation remains murky. Most importantly, as observed in the case of controversies within the EOTC, when it is under pressure, the government concedes unstable compromises to the demands of most believers that will significantly affect state-church relations.

This has a direct impact on the media activities. As noted in the previous section, the Ethiopian media have been reluctant to report the controversies and conflict in the country. Mostly, the media either report in a different frame, give negative narration, or silence in dealing with controversies in the entra- and inter-religion conflicts. Media as a platform for the public should bring relevant cases for public discussion. And, the media should thoroughly report the causes, factors, consequences, and potential solutions for the cases by including diverse views, ideas from different sources. Then, they might succeed in playing a constructive role in society. Whereas journalists' denial of reporting important issues of religion and religious controversies and conflicts by claiming they are favouring secularism is purely their misunderstanding and missing their fundamental role in informing the public.

The Ethiopian media have been reluctant to report the controversies and conflict in the country.

15 The Derg killed the second patriarch of the EOTC, Abune Theophilos. When EPRDF came to power, it immediately overthrew the patriarch who was elected during the rule of the Derg. The current leadership, however, mediated the reunification of the two synods.

16 In the recent incidence in the EOTC, the armed groups killed close to 40 people at Shahemeni town while followers were trying to protect their church from the newly appointed bishop. It would be rather the responsibility of the state to protect its people from such kinds of killing and harassments from the armed forces and other illegal groups.

17 This study shows the unclear dissociation of religion and the state by taking the recent case of EOTC and Ethiopia Mejlis. It is however fair to reason out the possible wrong understanding of the ideology of secularism in Ethiopia media and the political elites. Or it can be a deliberate ignorance of the state and the media to use it in favor of their interests.

5. Concluding remarks: Media in a multi-religious society

By Terje Skjerdal and Mulatu Alemayehu Moges

The paradox when it comes to media and religion in Ethiopia is the following: The population is highly religious, but the largest media in the country are highly un-religious.

The policy of non-involvement in religion has had different motivations throughout the years. For the Derg regime (1974 to 1991) it was consistent with Marxist ideology to suppress religious expressions in the public sphere. EPRDF kept the principle when it took over in 1991. Ethiopian Radio and Television came to reflect the 1995 Constitution where Ethiopia was defined as a secular state which meant that "the state shall not interfere in religious matters". Journalists who worked in the state broadcaster until 2018 tells how they were not allowed to cover religion except in extraordinary cases and how they were required to stay religiously 'neutral' in the sense that they were not allowed to wear any symbols that could be interpreted as adherence to a certain religion. It is nevertheless a question to what extent the anti-religious policy during EPRDF reflected Marxist heritage and to what extent it was rather a strategy to diminish potential conflicts. Conversations with journalists who worked in Ethiopian Radio and Television at the time suggest that conflict avoidance was the main reason for suppressing religious issues. Religion somehow connoted conflict and hence became part of the state media's no-go areas (cf. Mulatu, 2017b). At the same time, journalists also seem to have been influenced by a secular idea that society secures religious 'neutrality' by keeping religion out of the public domain and not letting state organs deal with faith issues.

The strategy of silencing religion in the public sphere changed when Abiy Ahmed came to power. However, the new openness for religion in the government administration has not altogether changed the policy by different parts of the

Programme host and contestant on a business entreprenurship programme on Ethiopian Television. (Screenshot from EBC 22 October 2023)

media. Government-loyal media such as Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation have indeed not introduced any new guidelines as regards coverage of worldview and religion. EBC's editorial policy from 2015 is still in force, declaring that the broadcaster 'is a secular medium' and therefore should ought to stay 'religiously neutral'. However, several editors and reporters interpret the motions from the government in such a way that they believe the broadcaster has been granted greater freedom and that it is therefore tolerable to wear religious symbols in the newscast, for example. "A TV station has to look like its people and must accept diversity," says one informant. Others disagree and argue that the official media should continue to stay religiously 'neutral' as much as possible. The argument is often supported by a desire to stay out of any religious conflict.

The independent media are more prone to give room for worldview and religion in their reporting. The Meskel Square dispute, for example, was given virtually no coverage in the government-loyal media but was widely covered by independent media outlets. There are also examples of media channels which have 'exploited' religious conflicts to advance ethnic agendas (cf. Skjerdal and Mulatu, 2021). Outlets which have obtained a religious 'broadcasting licence', however, are careful to avoid any conflict issue in their programmes. Characteristically, a manager of a religious TV station says, "We calm down the people and follow the rules of the government". The government, however, has not been willing to genuinely open up for religious broadcasting and continues to prohibit radio stations owned by religious institutions. This is a policy which stands in contrast to that of other Sub-Saharan African countries. The Ethiopian government continues to exercise a control strategy vis-à-vis faith-based media outlets and in relation to religious media content.

Governments take different approaches to the question of religion in the public sphere, historically as much as today. The philosopher Os Guinness (2013) describes three main strategies on how to approach worldview differences in the 'global public square'. The two outermost positions are the 'sacred public square' and the 'naked public square', whereby the sacred public square signi-

The independent media are more prone to give room for worldview and religion in their reporting.

fies a society where one particular worldview is completely dominant and state-sanctioned, such as Shia Islam in Iran, and the naked public square is a society where religion is officially detested from public expression, such as in China. The middle position is that of the 'civil public square', which allows religious expressions and gives room for people of different faiths – as well as secularists – to exercise their deepest convictions both privately and in public without fearing sanctions from the state or from fellow citizens. The civil public square is the prerequisite of the Global Charter of Conscience which was endorsed by the United Nations rapporteur for religious freedom in 2012. Arguably, Ethiopia has become familiar with both the sacred and the public square in its past regimes. The Ethiopian empire had a policy where one religious strand, Christian Orthodoxy, dominanted as state religion and where other faiths, particularly Islam, were suppressed, more or less. By contrast, the exercise of the secular policy of the Derg regime and the 1995 Constitution of EPRDF comes close to a naked public square where religious expressions have been generally discouraged from public institutions and from appearing in the national media unless they represent cultural festivals and the like. The official policy to media and religion in Ethiopia is still inspired by the idea of the naked public square. The enigma of the naked public square becomes particularly evident in a society where most people regard themselves as religious by integrating faith-based rituals as part of their life. A civil public sphere, by contrast, respect differences in worldview and does not banish religion to the private sphere. A civil approach to religion believes that faith issues can be illuminated by public reason and gives no special rights for specific groups whether they are religious or non-religious. A viable long-term strategy for Ethiopian media policy could be to be inspired by the ideals of the civil public square.

A viable long-term strategy for Ethiopian media policy could be to be inspired by the ideals of the civic public square.

Religion is visible everywhere in the Ethiopian society – but not so much in the media. (Photo by Terje Skjerdal)

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