Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

Home

> Research Program

> Responses to Information Requests

Responses to Information Requests

Responses to Information Requests (RIR) respond to focused Requests for Information that are submitted to the Research Directorate in the course of the refugee protection determination process. The database contains a seven-year archive of English and French RIRs. Earlier RIRs may be found on the UNHCR's Refworld website. Please note that some RIRs have attachments which are not electronically accessible. To obtain a PDF copy of an RIR attachment, please email the Knowledge and Information Management Unit.

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21 November 2016

ETH105685.E

Ethiopia: Treatment of ethnic Amharas; the All Ethiopian Unity Party (AEUP), including treatment of its members and supporters by authorities (2014-November 2016)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Treatment of Ethnic Amharas

Sources indicate that the Amhara is the second largest ethnic group in Ethiopia (US 3 Nov. 2016; IBTimes 10 Aug. 2016). According to sources, the Amharas number 38.4 million people (*PHW* 2015, 468), or 27.5 million people (US 3 Nov. 2016), or "at least 20 million" people (IBTimes 10 Aug. 2016). According to a 2016 study on GIS mapping of the Amhara Region, which is found in an edited physical geography anthology [1], the "Amhara National Regional State (ANRS)" is located in the northwestern part of Ethiopia (Mekonnen et al. 2016, 10). A 2014 archaeological and anthropological study of Ethiopian and Sudanese borderlands written by Spanish archeologist Alfredo González-Ruibal also states that the Amhara inhabit the "central highland plateau" of the country (González-Ruibal 2014, 81).

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a professor at the Institute of Political Studies Bordeaux (Sciences Po Bordeaux), whose research focus includes state formation, political parties and democratization in Sudan and Ethiopia, indicated, when asked about the treatment of ethnic Amharas by Ethiopian authorities, that "the question implies a kind of ethnic [division] within the society, which is not the case in reality. … [I]t is not a conflict between Amharas and the government. It is a conflict about land, power sharing, which has become very important in [the] Amhara region" (Professor 14 Nov. 2016). He further noted that the Amharas are also politically divided, with some accepting to join the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in the 1980s and 90s, becoming the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), transforming parties along ethnic lines, while another Amhara branch of the ethnic group did not accept the "ethno-federal arrangements" under the EPRDF and "Tigray dominance" (ibid.). In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, an associate professor at Georgetown University's Walsh School of Foreign Service, whose areas of expertise include political institutions, ethnic conflict and citizenship in Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania, indicated that

it is difficult to talk about the 'government's treatment of ethnic Amharas' or any other particular group. In general, the government targets political dissent and specific political activities, not ethnicity. Some ethnic groups face more scrutiny than others, and such scrutiny is motivated by security concerns. Due to protests in the Amhara region in the past six months, the ruling government is concerned about anti-government activity in the region, but there the government does not target Amharas as an ethnic group. (Associate Professor 15 Nov. 2016)

Similarly, in correspondence with the Research Directorate, a doctoral candidate in political science at the University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, whose research areas include territorial disputes and the political system in Ethiopia, indicated that

[e]thnic Amharas are not subjected to any special treatment, compared to other ethnic groups. In the 1960s, student activists considered Amharas as the historically and culturally dominant people. According to the student movement, being Ethiopian meant acting like an Amhara, and endorsing all aspects of Amhara culture (Amharic language, Amhara food, clothes, etc.). Ethnic federalism put an end at least officially to this Amhara domination. But historically, the so-called Salomonic dynasty remains an Amhara one, that's why Amhara opposition members are often accused to cultivate nostalgia for the imperial regime. The Amhara branch of the EPRDF - Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) – rules the Amhara region, several ministers are Amharas. … Amharas are not persecuted because they are Amharas. Rather, Amharas in Bahr Dar [also spelled out as Bahir Dar], Gonder [also spelled out as Gondar] and some other cities faced very harsh repression this summer *because they demonstrated* [emphasis in the original]. [Amharas] have been killed because they voiced grievances, because they demonstrated, and not just because they were Amharas. (Doctoral Candidate 10 Nov. 2016)

1.1 Demonstrations in Amhara During 2016

Amnesty International reports that protests in Amhara began on 12 July 2016 when security forces attempted to arrest the leader of the Wolqait [Wolqayt or Welkait] Identity and Self-Determination Committee for "alleged terrorism offenses" (Amnesty International 8 Aug. 2016). Amnesty International indicates that Wolqait is an administration district in Tigray Region that was formerly part of Amhara Region prior to 1991, and has been "agitating for reintegration into Amhara" for 25 years (ibid.). Sources indicate that the protests took place in Gondar and Bahir Dar against Tigray's administration of the Wolqait region, with demonstrators demanding that the territory be administered by the Amhara region (ibid.; Doctoral Candidate 10 Nov. 2016). Amnesty International indicates that protestors were also demanding "political reform, justice and the rule of law" (Amnesty International 8 Aug. 2016). The Associate Professor cites information provided by inhabitants from the Amhara region as stating that the protests are the reflection of a collective belief held by the Amhara people that they have not been benefiting from the Ethiopian government for the past twenty five years (Associate Professor 15 Nov. 2016). The same source further indicated that the protests are motivated by longstanding grievances around Amhara access to economic and political power in Ethiopia (ibid.).

According to the Doctoral Candidate,

the initial event that triggered the demonstrations was the project to integrate Wolqayt, a district of the Tigray region, into the Amhara region. This is a long-standing claim made by some Amhara élites. Wolqayt is a mainly lowland area with substantial land reserves – a highly valuable asset given Ethiopia's agricultural policies. Indeed, during the last decade or so, the Government has embarked on a policy of leasing large parcels of land to private investors. With 80 percent of the population still making a living from farming activities, we easily understand the high value land always had in Ethiopia, and its importance in political debates. Last spring, meetings were organised by a committee campaigning for the integration of Wolqayt to the Amhara region. They gained substantial support in the cities, notably Gonder and Bahr Dar. The imprisonment of the Wolqayt Committee leaders led to huge demonstrations in Gonder and Bahr Dar. These were organized with the help of some low-levels officials, and many students and urban jobless young people took part. The official motto was about Wolqayt and its historical place as an Amhara land, but youngsters rapidly voiced their grievances towards the Party-State. They also claimed for unity with Oromo demonstrators [2], who started to demonstrate in 2014 – and with greater intensity in 2015-2016. … The mobilization in the Amhara region was triggered by a land issue, but it rapidly took a much wider dimension of opposition to the EPRDF regime, described as a Tigrayan one. … [E]thnic identities being the basis for political representation in the contemporary institutional system, people voice their grievances in the language of identity. Young people demonstrating last summer were often less than 25 years old, which means they only knew this system of ethnic representation. For them, politics can only be ethnically-based. Hence, what appear[s] to be identity questions often cover much wider questions of socio-economics opportunities and political rights. (Doctoral Candidate 10 Nov. 2016)

Sources indicate that approximately 100 people were killed during the demonstrations during first week of August 2016 (*The Huffington Post* 18 Aug. 2016; Amnesty International 8 Aug. 2016). Amnesty International further states that "hundreds" were arrested and held at "unofficial detention centres, including police and military training bases" (ibid.). Sources indicate that since the protests began in 2015, more than 500 people have been killed (*The Guardian* et al. 10 Oct. 2016; *The Huffington Post* 18 Aug. 2016) and "tens of thousands have been detained" (ibid.). According to sources, the Ethiopian government declared a "state of emergency" in early October 2016 in response to the protests (*The Guardian* et al. 10 Oct. 2016; US 12 Oct. 2016). A press statement by the US Department of State indicates that the measure "authorize[s] detention without a warrant" and further limits "freedom of expression, including by blocking internet access, prohibiting public gatherings, and imposing curfews" (ibid.).

According to the Doctoral Candidate, "[w]hen young people were killed by security forces in Bahr Dar, their fathers and families in the surrounding rural *qebelés* [kebeles] took up arms against the soldiers (but this

remained very localised)" (Doctoral Candidate 10 Nov. 2016). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

2. The All Ethiopian Unity Party (AEUP)

The *Political Handbook of the World 2015* (*PHW*) indicates that the All Ethiopian Unity Party (AEUP) is "an outgrowth of factionalization within the All-Amhara People's Organization (AAPO), which initially supported the EPRDF but went into opposition over the issues of ethnic regionalization" (*PHW* 2015, 477). The Professor further stated that

[i]n order to 'resist' the Tigray dominance, to oppose the ethno-federal regime, and to contest [the] Eritrean path to independence, some Amharas led by Prof. Asrat Woldeyes and Haylu Shawel [also spelled out as Hailu Shawel] created the All Amhara People Organization (AAPO). They have been defending a strong Ethiopian nationalism, individual rights against collective right (ethno-federalism), privatization of lands, [and the] reintegration of Eritrea into Ethiopia. (Professor 14 Nov. 2016)

According to the *PHW*, after the 2000 elections, when the AAPO won "only" one seat in the House of People's Representatives, the party suffered an internal division after which Haylu Shawel founded the AEUP "in consonance with its stated goal of downplaying its Amharic orientation in favor of outreach to 'all Ethiopians'" (PHW 2015, 477).

The Professor indicated that the AEUP is the "historic party of the liberal branch, historically and ideologically opposed to the EPRDF," and that "it is thus a kind of mother party of other branches who separated directly or indirectly, like the famous CUD [Coalition for Unity and Democracy], UDJ [Unity for Democracy and Justice], EDP [Ethiopian Democratic Party], and even the youngest Blue Party" (Professor 14 Nov. 2016). He further noted that the AEUP, UDJ and Blue Party were "very active in the pre-2015 electoral campaign in order to mobilize Amharas in the Amhara regions," but the AEUP has been diminishing since the elections of 2010 and 2015 where the "EPRDF's affiliated [National Electoral Board of Ethiopia, NEBE] contributed a lot to its final decline" (ibid.). Without providing further details, Voice of America (VOA) reports that Ethiopian opposition parties accused the NEBE of "complicat[ing] procedures for no good reason" in the months leading up to the May 2015 elections; this act raised "doubt that the elections [were] free or fair" (VOA 14 Jan. 2015). The US Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2015* for Ethiopia indicates that for the May 2015 elections,

the EPRDF and affiliated parties won all 547 seats to remain in power for a fifth consecutive five-year term. … Government restrictions severely limited independent observation of the vote. A mission from the African Union, the sole international institution or organization permitted to observe the voting, called the elections 'calm, peaceful and credible.' Some [NGOs] reported that an environment conducive to free and fair elections was not in place prior to the election. There were reports of unfair government tactics, including intimidation of opposition candidates and supporters, and violence before and after the election that resulted in six confirmed deaths. (US 13 Apr. 2016, 1)

2.1 Treatment of AEUP Members and Supporters by Authorities

Information on the treatment of members and supporters of the AEUP by authorities was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The Professor provided the information in the following paragraph:

The treatment of AEUP members is "very harsh, especially in the provinces." The AEUP has "suffered a lot from EPRDF repression;" its members and militants have been arrested regularly and beaten, while some have disappeared or have been found killed. Other members of the party have left the country out of fear. There have also been reports of party associates and their family members being harassed, including in their workplaces. But the most vulnerable activists are "second class militants," who are regularly threatened and put in jail for a few hours, or for weeks or months (Professor 14 Nov. 2016).

Sources report that Mamushet Amare, former president of the AEUP, was arrested and accused of promoting unrest at a rally against ISIS (Borkena 3 June 2015; US 13 Apr. 2016, 8). The US *Country Reports 2016* indicates that the arrest took place on 13 May 2015, but when a court ordered Amare's release on 2 June 2015, the police rearrested him "citing a need to investigate his case further" (ibid.). The same source indicates that on 28 August 2015, "the Federal First Instance Court ordered Mamushet's acquittal and release after his defense proved prosecution witnesses falsely testified against him" (ibid.). Ethiopian news website Borkena reports that Mamushet was "arbitrarily" stripped of his leadership role of the AEUP, which he was battling in court when the arrest took place (Borkena 3 June 2016). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Notes

[1] The study was jointly carried out by researchers from the Amhara National Regional State and Florida State University (Mekonnen, Mulatie et al. 2016, 9).

[2] Sources indicate that in November 2015, peaceful demonstrations took place in the Oromia region (Amnesty International 8 Aug. 2016; *The Huffington Post* 18 Aug. 2016) to protest the "government's approach to development" (ibid.). According to Amnesty International, the government's plan consisted of integrating parts of the Oromia region into Addis Ababa (Amnesty International 8 Aug. 2016). *The Huffington Post* reports that as the government's response "intensified," protesters began to shift the focus of the demonstrations to "longstanding abuses and discrimination" (*The Huffington Post* 18 Aug. 2016).

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Oral sources: Assistant Professor of political science, Center for African Studies, University of California Berkeley; Associate Professor of conflict resolution, School of Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason

University; Former Visiting Fellow of anthropology, African Studies Centre, University of Leiden; Honorary Fellow in politics, School of Social and Political Science, The University of Edinburgh; Senior Researcher of the history and culture of the Horn of Africa, African Studies Centre, University of Leiden.

Internet sites, including: *Africa Confidential*; *Africa Research Bulletin*; AllAfrica; BBC; Bertelsmann Stiftung; ecoi.net; Factiva; Fédération internationale des ligues des droits de l'homme; Freedom House; Horn Affairs; Institute for Security Studies; Institute for War and Peace Reporting; International Crisis Group; IRIN; Minority Rights Group; Radio France internationale; TesfaNews; UN – Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, Refworld, ReliefWeb; US – Embassy in Addis Ababa.

Tips on how to use this search engine.

Top of Page

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