

## Oromo

Population: 24.5 million (percentage from 1994 National Census, multiplied by the CIA's 2007 estimate of total population).

### Profile

Oromo are the largest ethnic minority group in Ethiopia, and are speakers of Oromo languages (Oromigna, Oromiffa, 'Galla'). They are predominant in southern, south-eastern and south-western Ethiopia but also live in the highland areas. Historically, Oromo are the group which has most reason to view the Amhara - traditionally the ruling elite - as arrogant and exploitative colonial conquerors.

This is due in part to the fact that Oromo are the most numerous group in Ethiopia and live in every region except Gondar and Tigray. They are diverse in terms of their culture, social organization and religion, although most retain some features of their unique and complex generation-grading system, *gada*. In some areas they are too assimilated with the Amhara to be easily organized into a disciplined national opposition.

Historically Oromo have never formed a single state but were organized in small societies of clans and villages. There are four main groups: western Oromo, mainly in 'Wollegha', many of whom have been Christianized by missionary churches; northern Oromo, of Mecha-Tulam, modern Shoa and the area to the south, who are more integrated into Amhara culture than other Oromo groups, are mostly Christians of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and speak Amharic; southern Oromo, who often have semi-nomadic lifestyles and are not incorporated into any larger regional or religious unit; and Borana, believed by some to be the seminal branch of the Oromo because of their rigid observance of the *gada* social system, and who live in an arid area of Ethiopia along the border with Kenya. Eastern Oromo of Haraghe include the Muslim population of Harar and Dire Dawa, among others. This group has strong links to the Arab world and its local leaders have a strong Muslim orientation. The term Oromia, signifying an independent Oromo state, is important to the Oromo and the OLF, allowing them to consolidate their various regional and related groups into one Oromo nation.

### Historical context

From the nineteenth century until the 1987 Ethiopian Constitution, it was clear that Oromo would continue to be entirely subordinated to central control and direction. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church also received land grants to encourage proselytization of the largely pagan and Muslim population. Between the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Oromo lost between two-thirds and three-quarters of their land.

After Haile Selassie was restored by the British in 1941, tenancy was reintroduced and continued up to 1974, despite periodic protests from Oromo. In 1973 this discontent resulted in the formation of the OLF. Many Oromo suffered greatly in the famine of 1973-4, especially in Wollo province, along with the Wolloye Amharas, Tigrayans and Afars. A quarter of a million people died before the government

acknowledged the disastrous situation. The new regime under the Dergue ended the tenancy system but enforced collectivization and resettlement came in its wake. In Oromo lands, 95 per cent of ex-landlords were Amhara. They also controlled the police force and bureaucracy. Between March 1975 and April 1976 violent clashes took place as they took revenge on Oromo peasants for the loss of their land under tenure reorganization. By 1978 the OLF reported that 80,000 Oromo peasants had been killed by armed Amhara in Haraghe. The Dergue's policy of village-ization began in the province of Haraghe where there was much OLF activity and Oromo were charged with collaboration with the Somali Liberation Front in the Ogaden War. By February 1986, 3 million people had been moved into centralized villages, facilitating political control over the region. Oromo faced heavy taxation, forced labour on state farms and abduction into the armed services. They were discriminated against in education and only small numbers held skilled or professional jobs. Civilians were also subjected to armed aggression. The effects of the famine in 1984 were exacerbated by military conscription of males and because little aid reached the eastern Oromo region.

In the second half of the 1980s, the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front's new leadership tried to widen support for its organization by recruiting members from among the different peoples of Ethiopia. The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) was formed in January 1989 and an Oromo journal claims it set out to gain new recruits from captured Oromo conscripts who had been forced into the Dergue's army, to create the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO). Most of the Oromo abroad and the intellectual leadership were pro-OLF. The extension of EPRDF control over Oromo territory during operations against the Ethiopian army in spring 1991 induced a negative response from the OLF, who feared a new colonization of Oromo land. Following the harassment and intimidation of its supporters ahead of 1992 parliamentary elections, the OLF took up arms. The rebellion was quickly subdued, but has continued to smoulder ever since. During the 1998-2000 border war between Ethiopia and Eritrea the OLF was allied with Asmara.

The OLF has competed with other militant organizations for popular support, including the Oromo People's Liberation Front and the Islamic Front for the Liberation of the Oromo. At times this has spilled into intra-group violence.

The government has frequently pointed to OLF actions, or its mere existence, as reason enough to suppress the broader Oromo population. Accusations of terrorism have provided cover for the government to stifle political dissent.

In January 2004, government forces arrested 349 Oromo students in Addis Ababa during a protest for their right to stage an Oromo cultural event at the university. The Ethiopian Human Rights Council reported that the detainees were forced to march over gravel for hours, barefoot or on their knees.

## **Current issues**

In the run-up to May 2005 parliamentary elections, government repression was especially harsh in Oromia, one of the opposition strongholds. It often acted through OPDO, the Oromo affiliate of the ruling EPRDF that forms the government in Oromia. Human Rights Watch reported 'deeply entrenched patterns of human rights violations', including arbitrary detention, beatings, torture, harassment by security forces, forced attendance at OPDO/EPRDF political rallies, and political intimidation of pupils at school.

In September 2005, Meles agreed to meet with the OLF, which was considering whether to lay down its arms. Some reports interpreted the government's new willingness to negotiate with the OLF as a result of its poor showing among Amhara people in the May elections and the resulting need to find new

support. However, the government crackdown on renewed protests of May's disputed parliamentary elections led to new violence in Oromia in November 2005. In its wake, according to Amnesty International, the government rounded up thousands of school and college students.

In November 2006 the president of the Oromia Supreme Court fled to the UK, alleging that Prime Minister Meles was targeting those who criticized him. As Ethiopia's military involvement in Somalia increased in late 2006, there were reports of OLF cooperation with the Somali Islamic Courts Union (ICU).