

## Ethiopia: the Quran moves into the Horn of Africa



In a land where Christianity and Islam have existed since their earliest days, Christians and Muslims have been living side by side in peace for centuries. Will the repercussions of the Arab revolutions reach all the way to Ethiopia and the region?

?Mohammed Hussein Al Amoudi is one of the hundred wealthiest men in the world. He lives between Addis Ababa and Riyadh, is of Ethiopian birth and has Saudi nationality. His fortune has been amassed through his work in a wide range of sectors including mining, hospitals, finance, agriculture and oil. There is only one other dark-skinned man in the world who has greater wealth than he does.

Incredibly acute inequality is nothing out of the ordinary in Ethiopia – a country with eighty million inhabitants whose life expectancy is below fifty. Ethiopia has an incredibly exclusive elite made up of few very wealthy citizens, with very prosperous countries not too far away. For a case in point, we could look at the United Arab Emirates or Saudi Arabia, nations that have built their immense wealth on oil. These are Islamic countries keen to swell the ranks of those who follow the words of the Quran, even in Queen Sheba’s homeland, where Mohammed sought refuge when he was forced to flee persecution in Mecca.

“Our challenge also centres around the poverty of our own people”, says the Catholic Metropolitan Archbishop of Addis Ababa, Abune Berhaneyesus Dermerew Souraphiel, “the Saudis help our poor people in exchange for them converting to Islam. The Saudis know that they will not be good Muslims, but that their children will be. In this way, Saudi Wahabbism is putting peaceful coexistence in Ethiopia at risk”.

On 9 August, 10,000 Muslims paraded through the streets of the capital to celebrate the end of Ramadan. They called for the release of the imams arrested some twenty months ago because of their links with fundamentalist groups and the sermons they preached after praying. Religious leaders have been accused of conspiring against the state. The demonstration descended into violent clashes, with some injured and a few deaths. The Islamic community has very tense links with the government, even though several ministers are Muslim. The country's economy is seeing strong growth, but a lot is left to be desired in the area of human rights. For instance, one year ago, twenty journalists were convicted of conspiring against the government and given very severe sentences of between eight years and life.

In August last year, the Orthodox Patriarch Abuna Paulos and Melles Zenawi died. The latter had been the one to overthrow the former dictator, Mengistu, before ruling the country from the end of the 1991 war onwards. The deaths of these two important figures now means that the political balance and religious balance are much more delicate. According to the last government census, 34% of Ethiopians practice Islam, while Christians make up 62% of the population. 44% of Ethiopians are Orthodox Christians, while 17% are Protestant and only 1% are Catholics, who number around 800,000 in total. Despite their small numbers, the Catholics run a large share of the social services. For some time, Christians and Muslims have worked together on several social works. Furthermore, recently an Interreligious Council was created in order to facilitate dialogue and manage shared services.??“The government entrusts us with many social services because we do not discriminate”, says the Archbishop of Addis Ababa and President of the Ethiopian Bishops' Conference, who underscored the fact that nor should the state discriminate against anyone, basing itself on its own most fundamental form of legislation, “our constitution is open to all religious groups. The Muslims would like to impose Sharia law, but public courts do not apply religious laws”.??In Ethiopia, many keep a close eye on how the crises in North Africa and the Middle East are developing, in particular those in Syria and Egypt. If the Muslim Brotherhood ends up on top, this could grant renewed strength to Islamic Salafist groups, who want to impose Sharia law and give Muslims a greater presence in public life.

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