

The Intellectualist movement in Ethiopia, the Muslim Brotherhood and the issue of moderation

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■ Executive summary

The Intellectualist movement is one of the major Islamic reform movements in contemporary Ethiopia. Informal and decentred in character, it has attracted young students, professionals and urban intellectuals. The movement was inspired by the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood, which were critically contextualised and applied to the Ethiopian context. This has entailed avoiding the more political aspects of the Brotherhood, while emphasising the positive role of Islamic virtues in the formation of individual and societal piety. The Intellectualists have also been formative in Ethiopian Muslims' thinking about secularism, democracy and constitutional rule, and have played a significant role in mediating between various religious actors in Ethiopia, as well as negotiating the position of Islam vis-à-vis the political authorities. Of particular importance has been the way in which the movement has served as a moderating force in a rapidly changing and fluid political and religious landscape. This demonstrates the inherent complexity of the trend commonly labelled as Islamism, and points to the need for nuanced and localised approaches when attempting to understand this trend.

Introduction

With a focus on what we have labelled the Intellectualist movement, which was inspired by ideas from the Muslim Brotherhood, this report provides insights into particular aspects of contemporary Islamic reformism in Ethiopia and aims to fill a gap on the country's religious map. Informal in character, the movement emerged in the early 1990s as a fluid network of likeminded individuals who met regularly in small reading groups. Its "members" referred to it as the *jama'a* – a generic Arabic term for "community" or "group". It was an elitist movement that consisted of students, academics and intellectuals.

A point that should be clarified at the outset is that there has never been an organised Muslim Brotherhood presence in Ethiopia. There are no logistical links to any outside Muslim Brotherhood groups, nor have there been any attempts by such groups to create a Muslim Brotherhood movement in Ethiopia. Ideas stemming from the Brotherhood have, however, been clearly present in Ethiopia, and the movement has been a crucial source of inspiration for the Intellectualists, who have been formative in shaping the Muslim religious discourse in post-1991 Ethiopia.

Analysing the Intellectualists in relation to the broader dynamics of the post-1991 period, a major objective of the report is to explore how local actors actively selected and appropriated Muslim Brotherhood ideas to fit the Ethiopian context, focusing in particular on questions of democracy, secularism and the role of religion in the public sphere. This is important for two reasons: firstly, it changes the picture presented by the Ethiopian government and some outside observers of an increasingly radicalised Islam in Ethiopia and offers a more nuanced picture. Secondly, an analysis of Ethiopian representations of Muslim Brotherhood ideas helps us to interrogate the complexity inherent in the concept of Islamism. Such an analysis recognises the multiplicity found in the concept, counters the often-repeated notion that Islamism is only about seeking state power for the establishment of an Islamic order and demonstrates the varieties of Muslim politics.

Data for the report was mainly collected through interviews of the Intellectualist movement's key figures and members. Having followed the movement closely for nearly a decade, we have managed to obtain important information about its organisational development and ideological trajectory. However, because of the movement's decentralised character, its fluid leadership, and lack of any coherent and agreed

on programme, the study has been methodologically challenging. The broad spectrum of informants, with their own interpretations of past events, have contributed to a complex and sometimes contradictory picture. Although the data has been critically evaluated and triangulated, we are obviously aware that our narrative remains incomplete.

Ethiopian post-Islamism?

The Muslim Brotherhood is generally viewed as fundamental to the development of the ideology commonly known as Islamism, an ideology usually portrayed as aiming to Islamise both society and the state, often through violent means. Democracy and a secular legal and political system are defined as illegitimate innovations (*bid'a*) that should be exchanged for an Islamic political order based solely on the sharia, i.e. Islamic law. It is, however, important to note that a range of views have always existed in the Muslim Brotherhood on the means for achieving such a political order and what it actually entails (Abed-Kotob, 1995; Pahwa, 2013; Zollner, 2009). In addition, recent events related to the Arab Spring (particularly in Egypt) have contributed to augmenting the movement's ideological dynamism (El-Sherif, 2014; Kenney, 2013) – developments that have also intersected with broader debates among Islamists, represented by the Justice and Welfare Party in Turkey and Ennadhā in Tunisia. What has emerged is multifaceted thinking around questions such as liberal democracy, secularism and the political role of sharia, producing a complex picture in which actors cannot easily be dichotomised as moderate or extremist, and where it is increasingly difficult to define what Islamism actually is.

The term “post-Islamism” has been presented as a solution to this problem.¹ As Asaf Bayat (2013: 8) uses it, it denotes a reaction to the “anomalies and inadequacies of Islamism” and a condition in which “the appeal, energy, and sources of legitimacy of Islamism are exhausted”. Post-Islamism does not, however, favour a limiting of religion's public and political relevance or a stronger acceptance of the secular, but constitutes a project that seeks to “fuse religiosity and rights, faith and freedom, Islam and liberty”. It represents an attempt to reconcile Islam with democracy, modernity and liberal values, “emphasizing rights instead of duties” (Bayat, 2013: 8).

While these suggestions are intriguing, it is important to ask if post-Islamism is the result of a paradigmatic shift and whether it requires the existence of an earlier Islamist phase. Can we instead talk of post-Islamism having a longer history, existing parallel to and as part of “classical” Islamism? Such questions have direct relevance for the Ethiopian context and significant bearing for our conceptualisation of Islamism. Although Bayat (2013: 29)

underscores the view that post-Islamism is not merely a marker of historicity, but rather a “critical departure from Islamist politics”, the concept has a temporal aspect to it, representing something coming *after* Islamism. In his study of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, Thomas Pierret (2013) has convincingly demonstrated that post-Islamism may exist without an Islamist precursor and that it does not constitute a “critical departure” from Islamism. The same is true for the Ethiopian case, and we will demonstrate in this study that from its very inception the Islamist trend represented by the Intellectualist movement was seeking to marry Islam with democratic rights, accepting and operating within a secularist framework.

The origin and trajectory of the Intellectualist movement in Ethiopia

After assuming power in 1991, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) introduced unprecedented changes for the historically marginalised Muslim population of Ethiopia. It reversed many of former regimes' repressive policies toward Islam and introduced a religious climate that recognised Muslims as integral to Ethiopia's religious landscape. These changes were welcomed by the Muslim population, boosted religious activities, opened the doors for engagement with the broader Muslim world and paved the way for the surfacing of various Islamic reform movements. The three main movements – the Salafi movement, the Jamat al-Tabligh and the Intellectualist movement – became vehicles for this new Muslim activism and produced an increasingly diversified Muslim community.² Appealing to a young generation coming out of a period marked by a coercive state-enforced modernisation that perceived religious adherence as reactionary and backward, the new reform movements provided this “generation of the Derg”³ with ways to create new religious identities and articulate allegiance to Islamic virtues.

The Intellectualist movement initially emerged at Addis Ababa University immediately after the political transition in 1991. It particularly appealed to a segment of the young generation that was urban, educated, proficient in English and intellectually mature. The movement organised places for prayer inside the university dormitories, reading and discussion groups, and larger meetings. Similar groups were soon set up at other university campuses. There was no defined or institutionalised leadership, but rather individuals who acted as *de facto* leaders, i.e. charismatic individuals with organisational skills who were respected for their intellectual capacity and knowledge of Islam. Particularly important were Idris Muhammad, a native of Dessie in Wollo Province who joined the university in 1991, and Hassan Taju from Gondar, who arrived in 1992. Idris

1 For other conceptualisations of post-Islamism, see Bayat (2007).

2 See Østebø (2008) for a detailed discussion of these movements.

3 The Derg literally means “committee” and signifies the Coordinating Committee of the Armed Forces, which took control in 1974. The term has been applied to the Marxist regime in power from 1974 to 1991.

was fluent in Arabic and well versed in Islamic scholarship, while Hassan was Idris's main "student". They would both play significant roles in the movement in the decades to come.

Religious literature was foundational for the Intellectualists, and the movement was all about reading and discussing. Foreign and local Islamic non-governmental organisations (NGO) made books available;⁴ the Ethiopian Muslim Youth Association (EMYA), which was established in 1992, was one of the most influential in this regard. The organisation's library was particularly important, providing the youth with free access to Islamic literature. While the EMYA tilted ideologically in a Salafi direction, this was not a major factor. However, because it was linked with the World Association of Muslim Youth in Riyadh, there was a Muslim Brotherhood connection. Also important was the surfacing of various Islamic magazines, of which *Bilal* and *Dawa* were the main ones, in addition to *al-Manar* of the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC).⁵

The period 1991-95 was the "golden age" of the Intellectualist movement in particular and of organised Muslim activity in Ethiopia more generally. This changed in 1995 when a period of regime control and cooption of the Muslim community was introduced. Events such as the violent clash between worshippers and the police in the al-Anwar mosque in Addis Ababa in February 1995 and the failed assassination attempt on then-Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak when he visited Addis Ababa in June of the same year were crucial and added to the Ethiopian government's concern over what it perceived to be the increasing radicalisation of Islam in the country. This led to the arrest of hundreds of Muslims and to the closure of many Muslim institutions, including the EMYA. Because an Egyptian Islamist group supported by the regime in Khartoum carried out the attack on Mubarak, the Ethiopian government reacted by expelling a large number of Sudanese nationals and banning all Sudanese NGOs operating in Ethiopia.

According to one informant, the EMYA's closure was "a disaster", since it entailed the closing of its library and the confiscation of religious literature.⁶ The banning of Sudanese NGOs furthered this curbing of access to Islamic literature and deprived the Intellectualists of what had shaped their thinking in the first place. The irony here is that while religious literature in English became scant, it provided space for the diffusion of Salafi literature in Arabic, i.e. the ideology the government associated with extremism.

The government's measures also left the EIASC as the only recognised organisation said to represent Muslim interests, but it was perceived as having been coopted by the government. The dominance of the EIASC and the absence of any alternative organisations furthered the decentred character of Ethiopian Islam, but, interestingly, enhanced the importance of the mosques. Because mosques were closed space for the authorities, this limited the government's ability to monitor Muslims' activities. Various groups with different ideological orientations were operating in the mosques, but no particular group was able to exert control over them, in turn furthering the situation of ideological fragmentation.

Structure, conflict and the Muslim Brotherhood

The informal character of the Intellectualist movement enabled it to escape the authorities' increasingly controlling gaze and to continue to conduct its activities relatively undisturbed. It attracted new students and expanded throughout the 1990s. The core activity was the study group, and members were usually recruited in mosques and through regular public lectures. Each group consisted of between eight and ten members that met on Sunday afternoons to spend time in reading and discussion. Public lectures could attract up to 600 people, but the number of groups was relatively low. During the initial years the core membership did not exceed more than 50, and even as the movement spread there were probably not more than ten to twelve groups at its peak.

The structure that evolved was similar to that of the Muslim Brotherhood. Each group – *usra* – consisted of seven members and had its own organiser. Three *usra* groups made up one *shuba*, and *shuba* meetings were organised when major issues were to be discussed. Participation in groups was shrouded in a form of secrecy. Meetings were held in private houses and members did not arrive and leave at the same time. According to one informant, the secrecy was "not in the sense that [the meetings] were illegal, but it was part of Islamic virtue not to talk about them". It was also a reflection of belonging to something special: "we were young, so the secrecy was an exciting thing."⁷ Another aspect was that of self-evaluation of members' intellectual development, commitment and, in particular, personal piety through a form of scorecard: "For example, praying in the mosque gave four points, praying at home gave less, and arriving in mosque on time gave extra points."⁸

It is important to note that our informants disagreed about the structure outlined above, indicating that the nature of

4 International NGOs included the African Muslim Agency from Kuwait, the Muslim World League and various Sudanese organisations.

5 Many of them had a relatively short lifespan and, judging from the number of issues printed, the readership was rather limited. *Bilal* came out in the period September 1993-January 1995, while three issues of *Dawa* appeared in 1993. For more details, see Hussein Ahmed (1998a; 1998b).

6 Author interview with a senior Intellectualist, Addis Ababa, June 2nd 2014.

7 Author interview with a former member of the Intellectualist movement, Addis Ababa, May 29th 2014.

8 Author interview with a former member of the Intellectualist movement, Addis Ababa, May 29th 2014.

the hierarchical structure was inconsistent. Moreover, the process of self-evaluation was unevenly practised among the groups and there were those who directly opposed it. Few knew that the structural arrangements were inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood. Most of those involved belonged to the same social networks, and in many cases there seem to have been no organised connections among the groups. This clearly demonstrates both the decentred character of the movement and its fluid character; i.e. it was constantly attracting new members and seeing older ones leaving the movement.

The question about the movement's association with the Muslim Brotherhood became gradually more pronounced as internal divisions emerged. The issue was highly complex and there are a number of different interpretations of what actually happened. What seems clear is that the disagreements date back to the late 1990s and revolved largely around questions of leadership. Attempts to create a leadership structure were undertaken around 1992 with the establishment of a *shura* (council), but it existed only until 1995, and a second attempt to establish a new one was made in 1997. Unhappy with this new *shura*, some senior Intellectualists distanced themselves from the movement while the remaining leadership continued with the movement's regular activities. In 2003 there were attempts at reconciliation, but it soon became clear that any solution was unlikely. In addition to the question about leadership, debates about structure emerged, revealing significant ideological differences.

Much of these disagreements revolved around the issue of the Muslim Brotherhood. While the debate was never about establishing a local branch of the Brotherhood in Ethiopia or creating links to the movement internationally, one faction (the existing *shura*) favoured closer affinity to the Brotherhood and an organisational structure modelled on it. The argument was that Muslims in Ethiopia should consider themselves as part of a global Islamic movement and be connected to currents in the broader Muslim world. The opposing faction, led by Idris Muhammad and Hassan Taju, fiercely objected to any form of linkage with the Muslim Brotherhood. Such a connection, they argued, would be detrimental to the movement: "We knew that if we created an organisation, the government would be curious. If we had been organised, the government would have cracked down on us."⁹ Idris Muhammad and Hassan Taju also emphasised the uniqueness of the Ethiopian case, arguing that the Muslim Brotherhood model would not suit the local context: "[We] didn't want to copy everything from the Muslim Brotherhood; we said that Islam in Ethiopia was unique, and we had to focus on this."¹⁰ Of particular importance was the emphasis on societal engagement that was separate from direct political involvement. While

inspired by the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Intellectualists were nevertheless clearly selective when appropriating these ideas: "we disliked the political aspect, believing that it didn't work in this country."¹¹

Whereas the remaining leadership of the Intellectualist movement continued the activities based on discussion groups, the internal conflict severely weakened the movement. Recruitment seems to have stagnated during the 2000s and there are no indications that more elaborate structures emerged. The movement remained confined to urban areas, mostly Addis Ababa, and its base was restricted to students, university graduates and a small Muslim intellectual class. However, the leadership managed to create separate organisations. The most vibrant of these was the Islamic Culture and Research Centre, established in 2003 and closed by the government in 2011.¹²

In contrast to the movement's secretive character, Idris Muhammad and Hassan Taju, who had walked out and continued their activities on an individual basis, gradually emerged as widely known public figures, the former as a popular public speaker and the latter as a prolific writer and publisher. These individuals and the Intellectualist movement more broadly – in spite of its elitist character – strongly influenced the younger Muslim generation, becoming a major player in the ideological discourse that in recent years has become increasingly complex and sensitive.

Ideological features and developments

It is difficult to define the ideological parameters of the Intellectualist movement. The Muslim Brotherhood was clearly a major source of inspiration, but so-called modernist Muslim thinkers also influenced the movement. Ideas were not introduced in a coherent and systematic way and the variety of ideas arriving through different books created a rather eclectic ideological picture. This was further buttressed by the movement's informal character and by the fact that the ideological boundaries between the different reform movements were rather porous in the early 1990s. Several informants describe their initial engagement with reformist ideas as starting with the Tabligh and moving on to become Salafis before honing their separate identity as Intellectualists. A few leading figures were more conscious of the Muslim Brotherhood influence, and those exposed to religious education earlier were able to integrate these ideas into their own thinking. But for many others the movement was about "enjoying the social forums ... and hanging out with one another."¹³

9 Author interview with a senior Intellectualist, Addis Ababa, June 3rd 2014.

10 Author interview with a senior Intellectualist, Addis Ababa, October 23rd 2013.

11 Author interview with a senior Intellectualist, Addis Ababa, June 2nd 2014.

12 Other organisations were Iman, which surfaced around 2003, and Ethiogulf, which was established around 2010.

13 Author interview with a former member of the Intellectualist movement, Addis Ababa, June 11th 2014.

As already mentioned, religious literature was foundational for the ideological formation of the Intellectualist movement, and for a young generation not proficient in Arabic, the availability of religious literature in English facilitated a kind of “discovery” of Islam. Informants talked about how books “changed me”, about how “we got a feeling for Islam through books”. Ideologically, the books covered a wide spectrum,¹⁴ but a significant portion stemmed from the Muslim Brotherhood, including those by Sayyid Qutb, Hassan al-Banna, Yusuf al-Qaradawi and Fathi Yakan, the founder of the Lebanese branch of the Brotherhood. However, in the initial phases there was limited awareness of the nature of this influence, and even if books by Sayyid Qutb were widely read in the early 1990s, few associated him with the Muslim Brotherhood. Only gradually did such awareness develop: “when we read more books about the Muslim Brotherhood we got more knowledge about the movement, and we also started to realise that the books we were reading were Muslim Brotherhood books.”¹⁵ Particularly important were *Six Tracks* by al-Banna and *To Be a Muslim* by Yakan, which were read privately and actively used in the various small reading groups.

Informants describe their engagement with the Intellectualist movement as a spiritual journey that was decisive in shaping their Muslim identity. It heightened their sense of piety and induced a strong sense of commitment to the tenets of Islam. The refining of personal piety was the most important topic for the small groups and the process ranged from praying regularly to observing the fast, following the Sunna on an individual basis and being a good person in relation to friends and family. Ideas about personal piety were taken from the Muslim Brotherhood, which also made it significantly different from the form of piety advocated by the Salafis, for whom the production of the pious self was inwardly oriented: “the language, the confidence [the Muslim Brotherhood writings] had in Islam, the way they wanted Islam to be public – all this was different from the traditional [Islamic] scholars we were used to.”¹⁶ Important sources of inspiration were *Islam the Misunderstood Religion* by Muhammad Qutb, *This Religion of Islam* by Sayyid Qutb, *The Status of Woman in Islam* by Jamal Badawi, *Islam and the World* by Abul Hassan al-Nadwi, *Islam between East and West* by Alija Ali Izetbegović, and *Tawhid: Its Implication for Thought and Life* by Ismail Raji al-Faruqi. The Intellectualists thought of personal piety as the point of departure for broader engagement, i.e. as something that could potentially transform society. Islam was a comprehensive religion that was relevant to all aspects of life and provided solutions to the problems faced by humanity at large. Consequently, Muslims were expected to be active in all sectors of societal and public life, and through their participation as both believers and members of society their religiously inspired conduct would then help

to form a society influenced by Islamic virtues. Muslims should therefore seek higher education, and through this gain access to positions where they could play a constructive role that contributes to the country’s development.

The Intellectualists were not merely passive receivers of outside influence, but displayed a high degree of agency in selectively and critically appropriating novel ideas for their particular context. Operating in a fluid religious landscape inhabited by a range of other religious currents and in particular having to relate to an increasingly hegemonic state were important issues in this regard.

The Intellectualists and the secular state

All our informants unanimously claimed that there was never any discussion of an Islamic state or political rule according to sharia law. This does not mean that political questions were avoided; in fact, the Intellectualist movement was the reformist movement with the most elaborate views on politics, discussing topics such as democracy, constitutional rule, multiculturalism and secularism. While thinking around these issues developed as the movement matured, it is important to keep in mind that the initial Intellectualists were in their early 20s when they joined the movement and that the movement constantly saw an influx of young people of a similar age. Furthermore, it should be noted that this ideological trajectory was deeply intertwined with shifting state politics that gradually became more assertive vis-à-vis the Muslim community.

The EPRDF maintained the secular character of the Ethiopian state, which was enshrined in the 1995 constitution. State and religion are separated (art. 11), any form of state religion is prohibited, and there are clear restrictions on government interference in religious matters, and vice versa. The practice of secularism has, however, been uneven. While the government has been adamant about religion not entering politics, it has been more flexible in terms of state interference in religious affairs.

Together with the wider Ethiopian Muslim population, the Intellectualists have been supportive of the secular order, seeing it as the system most suitable to preventing dominance by one religious group and to secure Muslim rights in a religiously plural Ethiopia. This is obviously related to the history of Christian dominance in the country, under which Muslims were reduced to secondary citizens. Support for secularism was thus partly a tactical move, as one informant explained: “We were a minority, and to advocate secularism was a strategy.”¹⁷ However, others had a more genuine faith in secularism, arguing that any form of infusion of religion into politics would be devastating for Ethiopia. Again, the reference to the country’s

14 This included works by the Shia scholar Ali Shiratti, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the Bosnian Alija Izetbegović and the Indian Abul Hassan Ali Hasani Nadwi, as well as Salafi writings such as Ibn Abd al-Wahhab’s *Usul Thalatha* and *Kitab al-Tawhid* and works by Saleh al-Fawzan.

15 Author interview with a former member of the Intellectualist movement, Addis Ababa, June 12th 2014.

16 Author interview with a senior Intellectualist, Addis Ababa, October 2nd 2006.

17 Author interview with a former member of the Intellectualist movement, Addis Ababa, October 20th 2013.

uniqueness is noticeable, and informants underscored the role of secularism in accommodating peaceful relations between Christians and Muslims. This was also a major reason why the more explicit political aspects of the Muslim Brotherhood's teaching were avoided: they have been accused of upsetting inter-religious relations even in Muslim-dominated countries. Leading figures among the Intellectualists also formulated more elaborate and theoretical thinking in support of secularism based on Islamic traditions and the particularities of Islam in Ethiopia. References were made to the Quran, to the Medina Constitution, through which the Prophet reached an accord with non-Muslims, and to the time of the Axumite Hijrah, when Muslims lived under the protection of the Christian king of Axum. The latter aspect was emphasised in particular, constituting what was referred to as the "Abyssinian model" and supporting the argument that secularism was permissible in Islam.

Attitudes towards secularism were also shaped by the EPRDF's more assertive secularist policies through which the regime was attempting to limit religion's role in the public sphere. This was most visibly played out in the banning of "Muslim clothing" in institutions of higher learning and in the preventing of Muslim students from performing their daily prayers on university premises, which aroused strong reactions in the Muslim community. But a more assertive secularism also contributed to refining the Intellectualists' ideas about secularism. They claimed that the regime was violating its own ideals and becoming anti-religious, and that denying people their religious rights actually counteracted the secular principle.

The regime's changing policy was based on a perception of Islam as becoming increasingly radicalised – a process that was accelerated by regional developments, especially in Somalia, and the global situation after the terrorist attacks in the U.S. on September 11th 2001. The EPRDF's assertive policy took a dramatic turn in July 2011, when the EIASC and the Ministry of Federal Affairs invited the Lebanese al-Ahbash movement to Ethiopia and embarked on enforced al-Ahbash training programmes throughout the country. The aim of the campaign was to warn Muslims about the alleged rise of Islamic extremism and to instruct them to adhere to a more moderate version of Islam.¹⁸ Muslims reacted negatively to the campaign, and the tense situation was exacerbated by the controversies around Awolia College in Addis Ababa in December 2011, when all the school's Arabic teachers were dismissed and the Arabic curriculum was suspended. This was the spark that ignited weekly Muslim demonstrations that lasted from the beginning of 2012 to August 2013. These protests were led

and coordinated by the so-called arbitration committee, which consisted of 17 members and represented a broad spectrum of the Muslim community that cut across ideological and ethnic divisions. The committee managed to keep the demonstrations remarkably disciplined and peaceful, and formulated three demands that were forwarded to the authorities: stop the state-enforced al-Ahbash campaign, permit free and fair elections to the EIASC, and return the Awolia College to the "people".

The regime interpreted the protests as a further expression of radical Islam and claimed that the demonstrators were attempting to take political power in Ethiopia.¹⁹ In July 2012 the police moved into the Awolia mosque in force and arrested the members of the arbitration committee. After months in prison as part of a group of 29, the committee members were charged with "plotting acts of 'terrorism'" in October 2012.²⁰ The protests continued unabated, however, coordinated by a Facebook page, "*Dimtsachen yesema*" (let our voice be heard), until the regime's final and violent crackdown on Eid al-Fitr²¹ in August 2013, effectively putting an end to the protests.²²

Towards accommodation and moderation

Little evidence points to the increased radicalisation of Islam in Ethiopia, and our findings have led us to suggest that developments in recent years are more about increased moderation and the rapprochement of the ideas of secularism and constitutional rule. This is interesting, given the fact that the government's brutal crackdown on the protests could have easily produced fertile ground for more "radical" responses. The movement towards moderation is arguably connected to a general moderation of Ethiopian political life, where in particular the ethnic card has lost much of its politicised effect. There is a stronger willingness to engage the government critically within the existing political framework and a realisation that it should be held accountable for its own policies. This has certainly been the case among Muslims.

The Intellectualist movement has been pivotal for this development, preventing the emergence of confrontational approaches and encouraging moderation. As one of our informants stated: "the Intellectualists' ideas saved Ethiopia. They were moderate ideas, and they blocked other more extreme ideas from entering."²³ The movement dominated Muslim discourses, where in particular the writings of Hassan Taju were widely read and accepted. While avoiding certain aspects of the Muslim Brotherhood's teaching, Ethiopian Muslims found much inspiration in works such as *Problem Faced by the Da'awa and Da'iyah* by

18 See Østebø (2013) for more details about the al-Ahbash movement and recent developments in this regard.

19 This was made clear in the documentary *Jihadawi Harekat* (jihadist movements) on the state-controlled Ethiopian Television in February 2013, and in a publication by the Ministry of Federal Affairs (2014), "Explanations of the deceitful messages spread by extremists among our people".

20 Most of them were later released and at the time of the writing the trial of the remaining nine was still pending.

21 Eid al-Fitr marks the end of the month of Ramadan.

22 No official figures for the number of arrests during the crackdown are available, but eyewitnesses estimate the total to be close to 10,000, most of whom were released a week after their arrest without charges.

23 Author interview with a former member of the Intellectualist movement, Addis Ababa, June 3rd 2014.

Fathi Yakan, *Islamic Awakening: Between Extremism and Rejection* by Yusuf al-Qaradawi and *Ethics of Disagreement* by Taha Jabir al-Alwani. Navigating among other reform movements and negotiating their position in relation to the political authorities, the Intellectualists managed to remain a mitigating force in a fluid and volatile religious and political terrain.

Struggling for moderation, the Intellectualists main concern was the rapid expansion of Salafism, which from the early 1990s was said to have become “the default form of Islam in Ethiopia”. The Salafis were criticised in particular for their uncompromising attitudes toward Sufism and indigenous representations of Islam, thus creating unnecessary rifts among Muslims. Another important aspect of the Intellectualists’ critique was directed towards the Salafis’ inwardness, accusing them of not becoming involved in societal affairs and ignoring the idea of working for the well-being of the Muslim community. In a somewhat ironic turn of events, therefore, the movement in Ethiopia charged with being the main representation of “Islamic extremism” was accused of being too quietist and too apolitical.

Two incidents illustrate this point. The first was the rebuttal of the Takfir wal Hijra group, which made inroads in Ethiopia around 1994-95.²⁴ Applying the principle of *takfir*,²⁵ the Takfiris severed connections with other Muslims, including other Salafis, labelling them all as non-believers. The critique presented by Hassan Taju in his book *Takfir: Error and Corrections* effectively led to the demise of this group. The second incident was the establishment of the Addis Ababa Ulama Unity Forum in 2007, which was devoted to mediating tensions between the Salafi and Sufi factions in Ethiopia. Hassan Taju was again instrumental in this process and for a period of nearly two years brought together leading scholars from both sides to discuss a range of controversial issues.

An important precursor for the formation of the leadership of the Muslim demonstrations discussed above was the so-called Monday Forum, which was established around 2008. It started as informal meetings in private homes in Addis Ababa, where the forum’s main concern was deteriorating Christian-Muslim relations, what was viewed as increasingly hostile Christian attitudes towards Islam, and the issue of internal divisions among Muslims. When the protests started, several of the forum’s members soon became active in the movement. The engagement was individually based and not a deliberate choice by the forum. Because many of them were already known to the public as preachers, young sheikhs, writers and journalists, they were soon elected to the arbitration committee. Responding to the regime’s accusation that both the Monday Forum and the arbitration committee were seeking to establish an Islamic state in Ethiopia, one member of the

forum responded in the following way: “We couldn’t even be arrive on time for our meetings Let alone working to establish an Islamic state, we didn’t even have the capacity to organise ourselves properly.”²⁶

While this young leadership was influenced by the Intellectualist movement, only a few had any links to the movement. The leadership also represented a far broader ideological spectrum, which points to a crucial aspect of this new generation: how they more easily crossed ideological boundaries. Also important was how they as the “generation of the EPRDF” were inevitably formed by the experiences of EPRDF rule and were exposed to the regime’s rhetoric about democracy, secularism, constitutional rule and development. This is not to say that they supported the ruling party’s policies, but because these ideas were internalised, they became important when critically engaging the authorities. The overriding theme of the demonstrations was that the government had illegally interfered in Muslim internal religious affairs and thus crossed the secular “red line”. Rather than calling for the overthrow of the government and the creation of an Islamic state, the protests were couched in human rights language that emphasised religious freedom and constitutional rule.

The events of recent years have been important in shaping a more elaborate way of thinking about the role of Islam in relation to politics and the public among Ethiopian Muslims, which entails a stronger acceptance of democracy, secularism and constitutional rule. An important reason for this is that the demonstrations were highly educational, even if few concrete results were achieved. The slogans, speeches made by the leaders and messages posted on social media were all clothed in language that referred to the constitution, democracy and human rights, and demonstrate how the protests became a pedagogical tool in which democratic and secular values penetrated the minds of the country’s Muslims and gained new meaning. There was a realisation that this was more than empty words: they actually had a real and practical content that had the potential to create a better and freer society.

Obviously this does not mean that there are no variations in how secularism was understood and how it should be exercised in an Ethiopian context. When discussing what kind of secularism would be most fitting for the country, informants often referred to the French and U.S. models. The former model was usually related to the EPRDF’s assertive secularism, and was seen as too intrusive and largely anti-religious. The latter model was seen as most suitable for Ethiopia, i.e. one that recognised the inherently religious nature of the country’s society and guaranteed freedom of religious expression. This has direct relevance for the understanding of the role of Islam in politics and the boundaries between Islam and politics. While there are some variations, the dominant view has been one that

²⁴ The group arrived through Sudan and was particularly strong in the northern town of Gondar and the suburbs of Addis Ababa.

²⁵ *Takfir* refers to the issue of declaring a fellow Muslim an apostate.

²⁶ Author interview with a former member of the Monday Forum, Addis Ababa, December 15th 2014.

recognises the relevance of sharia, but which brackets this as a theological matter, displaying a distinct pragmatism when talking about sharia and state politics:

This is a point where all Muslims of Ethiopia agree: sharia should be the governing law [of any Muslim society]. However, this is something that is part of the *aqida*. There are no Muslim groups that think that this is something that can be practised. Everyone supports a secular state.²⁷

A senior Intellectualist referred to the principle of justice underpinning sharia, arguing that if this were to be violated, sharia rule would be meaningless: "What this means is that implementing sharia in a context like Ethiopia might not bring justice, because there are Christians who would not feel comfortable under such a system."²⁸ Secularism was thus seen as being consistent with the teachings of Islam. Another informant referred to the "Abyssinian model", arguing that establishing any form of Islamic party would be detrimental to the accommodation of religious pluralism. Some also referred to Islamist experiences in the Middle East, decrying recent developments: "I am losing confidence in the Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab world, particularly in Egypt They should have been more accommodating of the secularists and should have avoided dividing them and the religious groups."²⁹

It should be added that the protests have created divisions within the Intellectualist movement and among young Muslims more broadly. Some senior Intellectualists have been criticised by the imprisoned committee for their critique of the protests and for being too lenient on the government. Much of the disagreement revolves around tactical issues, about how to engage the authorities and about public demonstrations as a means to do so.

Conclusion

The case of the Intellectualist movement in Ethiopia demonstrates the limitations of the concept of post-Islamism. While the movement sought to fuse Islam and liberty, emphasising rights instead of duties, it never represented a later phase supplanting a period of politicised Islamism geared toward attaining state power in Ethiopia. Rather, it was post-Islamist from the very beginning, in turn pointing to simultaneity and mixture, and to a picture where Islamism has always encompassed a variety of ideological trends.

A particularly important factor is how the Intellectualist movement constituted a moderating force in the Ethiopian context. Inspired by Muslim Brotherhood ideas, it was able to mediate among different religious actors and with the state, constantly working for solutions that would be

appropriate for a context that it has always viewed as unique. This serves as an important reminder of the need to examine Islamism's actual meaning in the local context in which it appears, paying attention to how local actors interact with trans-local currents. A second and interrelated point is the Intellectualists' emphasis on Islamic virtues and their societal relevance. Such an Islamisation of society should not be viewed as a stepping stone toward an Islamic state – as is often assumed – but rather as an expression of the need to recognise religious values as important in the enhancement of the social fabric.

Ambiguities are clearly present in the ways in which the Intellectualists understand secularism and the role of religion in the Ethiopian context. This relates to how new religious configurations in various parts of the world are not easily confined to the private sphere, and to how religious actors in a post-secular age are seeking to reinterpret the meaning of secularism. Secularism in itself is an ongoing process, which is very clear in the Ethiopian case. The Intellectualist movement, although fragmented and further decentralised, remains an important voice in the constant formation of the country's future and deserves to be viewed as more than an expression of extremism.

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²⁷ Author Skype interview, December 2nd 2014.

²⁸ Author interview with a senior Intellectualist, Addis Ababa, December 17th 2014.

²⁹ Author interview with a senior Intellectualist, Addis Ababa, June 2nd 2014.

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